

**Indigenous Im/mobility in Tłı̨tłı̨t's'ėhkédélı̨ (Jean Marie River), Dehcho,
Northwest Territories**

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Preface

Hello. Thank you for picking up this dissertation. I am grateful that you are reading it.

My name is Brandon Joseph Pludwinski, my parents are Shelly and Irv Pludwinski. I grew up in a three-story, four-bedroom house with my brother Shawn, mother, father, and my Bubbie Libby on the Don River watershed on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit in Treaty 13 territory. I currently live in Sòmba K'è, Denendeh (Yellowknife, Northwest Territories) on Chief Drygeese Territory, the traditional territory of the Yellowknives Dene and the homelands of the Indigenous Métis of the North Slave Métis Alliance in Treaty 11 territory.

My paternal grandparents, Sam and Sylvia, made their way to North America after seeking refuge from religious persecution in Poland. They are survivors of genocide, and I take pride in being their grandson. Although we rarely spoke about our family history, I grew up knowing that I was connected by blood to Poland, Israel, and the Jewish community. While my ancestral roots trace back to Germany on my mother's side and to Poland on my father's, neither country is considered by my family or me to be our homeland. Instead, stories and memories of Auschwitz, the holocaust, and the rise of anti-Semitism that plagued Europe in the 1900's and early 2000's shape my family's spatial and ancestral ties.

I was raised in a Jewish household. We celebrated the Jewish holidays by going to synagogue and having big family meals at my Bubbie's and Aunt's houses. My parents sent me to Hebrew School every week from the time I was in kindergarten until I graduated high school at the age of 18, and I was called to the Torah as a Bar Mitzvah at age 13. Although Judaism and Jewish education were familiar to me, I didn't always embrace them.

Judaism is a religion grounded on questioning. As Jewish people, we are encouraged to question the writings of the Torah and form our own opinions, ideas, and perspectives, challenging that which doesn't make sense to us. As a kid, I was told that Hashem (the Jewish God) is a powerful, all-knowing entity that created the world order and oversees our lives. I never knew why, with all the power of our world and beyond, a God allow things like the holocaust, poverty, war, or oppression. Every time I sought an answer, my Rabbi at the time would explain the concept of Tikun Olam. Tikun Olam loosely translates to repairing (Tikun) the earth (Olam). The premise is that, as Jewish people, we should always strive to repair the world to make it more just. It is an ongoing task that can never be accomplished.

Like many other Jewish-Canadians, I view Canada as a complex safe-haven. My family found refuge from genocide in Canada while simultaneously abiding by the rule of law imposed by a nation-state actively complicit in the decades-long genocide of Indigenous Peoples.

As of age 26, I spent 18 summers at a Jewish residential summer camp in Haliburton, Ontario. There, I regularly led campers (aged 8-16) on multiday canoe journeys through Algonquin Provincial Park. I found immense joy in working with youth, teaching life and outdoor skills while building relationships with them out in the park. These experiences taught me to go with the flow, to be both silly and serious, to roast the perfect marshmallow, and some of the best practices for working with children and youth—pivotal skills that have followed me through this dissertation and my career.

When COVID-19 hit, I was already enrolled in a doctoral studies program, but the planned projects I had in Bangladesh, then Costa Rica, and later Whitehorse came to a halt. Stuck in southern Ontario, I turned inwards to identify what I wanted to get out of my PhD journey. As an avid canoer with an interest in the lasting legacies of colonization, climate change, and the role of

capitalism in shaping the modern world, I knew I needed to move North if I wanted to build the right relationships and have the lived experiences that would give meaning to my studies. In 2021, during the first year of my doctoral studies program in Geography, Environment, and Geomatics at the University of Ottawa, I relocated to Sòmba K'è.

Upon arrival in Sòmba K'è, I started working as the Environmental Education Program Manager at Ecology North, an environmental non-profit whose mission is to bring people and knowledge together for a healthy northern environment. Through this position, I had the opportunity to visit some of the communities deeply impacted by climatic and environmental changes—flooding in Tthets'èhkédélj (Jean Marie River), permafrost thaw in Teetł'it Zheh (Fort McPherson), fires in Ka'a'gee Tu (also spelled K'ágee Tue, Kakisa), and ocean level rise in Tuktoyaktuk—and develop curriculum materials to support land-based learning programs.

My professional role at Ecology North strengthened my relational accountability to this research. The position helped me better understand the scope of climate change in the North and the intertwined socio-cultural, economic, and political dimensions. It has also provided me with the training, resources, opportunities, and network necessary to respectfully reciprocate the knowledge and teachings that have emerged from this work with Tthets'èhkédélj Got'ie and youth across the North.

I share my positionality and my social and geographic locations to situate this study. Specifically, it offers the grounding to this work, exposing both who I am and who I am not (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021). It introduces you to the context that shapes how I engage, interpret, and tell every part of this story (Kitagawa, 2023; Wilson, 2008).

Abstract

In the Dehcho Region of Canada's Northwest Territories, the Tłı̨t̨ı̨'éhk'édélı̨ Got'ie (people downriver of McGill Lake), like many other Indigenous Peoples in North America and around the world, have traditionally practiced im/mobility, movement and stasis across time and space, since time immemorial. This research draws on im/mobility theory to highlight the social, cultural, political, and economic relations that inform how Indigenous Peoples move through time and space. Their im/mobility, often coded as seasonal rounds, reflects embodied relationships to land, culture, and community that shape Traditional Knowledge and spiritual, political, and stewardship responsibilities. In recent decades, colonial pressures and anthropogenic climate changes have pressed against these relationships and influenced im/mobility meanings, practices, and values.

This study aims to examine how the Tłı̨t̨ı̨'éhk'édélı̨ Got'ie experience and give meaning to im/mobility as a relationally informed practice in the Dehcho Region. It aims to (1) investigate the values that influence how the Tłı̨t̨ı̨'éhk'édélı̨ Got'ie move through time and space, contributing to a culturally grounded framework to articulate im/mobility; (2) foreground Indigenous relationships to land and climate change to understand how im/mobility functions as an embodied, relational practice; and (3) examine how im/mobility operates as pedagogy amidst assertions of Indigenous sovereignty.

The methodological approach adopted in this dissertation shows how non-Indigenous scholars can work with Indigenous communities to conduct relationally informed, ethical research. It outlines one approach to identifying and centering community research priorities and responsibly reciprocating knowledge through embodied, written, audible, and visual methods. It draws on qualitative interview data and reflexive field notes from an immersive field experience

(January 2023 – June 2023) and several years of community visits (and relationships) to show that im/mobility is not simply about movement through time and space, it is a relational practice that draws on connections with the land, subsistence autonomy, and the transmission of Traditional Knowledge. This research also shows how the Tthets'éhkédélj Got'ie are using im/mobility to relationally respond to climate and environmental changes, highlighting the ongoing and dynamic process of cultural continuity and survival. Finally, it explores how im/mobility embodies land-based sovereignty, pedagogy, and resistance to colonial containment. This approach exposes alternative ways knowing the human-nature relationship in the context of im/mobility, offering insight into alternative ways of responding to climate and environmental changes and enacting pedagogy.

This dissertation further showcases the importance of culturally relevant approaches to conceptualizing alternative meanings, values, and structures that shape how people relate to movement through time and space. It expands the scope of im/mobility research by focusing on Indigenous logics, perspectives, and meanings. Policy makers and community programmers can draw on this research to further root their im/mobility-related programing (e.g., community harvest programs) in Indigenous worldviews and perspectives.

Statement of Authorship and Collaborations

Chapters 1, 2, and 6 were written by Brandon Pludwinski and were reviewed by his dissertation supervisor, Dr. Sonia Wesche. Revisions offered conceptual feedback and intellectual support to strengthen the chapters. Dr. Brenda Macdougall also offered conceptual feedback and intellectual support for chapter 2.

Chapter 3: The research priorities were collaboratively conceived in partnership between Brandon Pludwinski, the Tłtsh'Éhkédélj First Nation Resource Management Coordinator Elder Margaret Ireland, Dr. Alex Latta, Julia Gyapay, and various Tłtsh'Éhkédélj Got'ie. Brandon Pludwinski conducted and transcribed the interviews and analyzed the data. The analysis was approved by Elder Margaret Ireland and Wellness Camp feedback session participants. Brandon Pludwinski wrote the chapter. Dr. Alex Latta, Dr. Sonia Wesche, and Julia Gyapay offered conceptual feedback and intellectual support. Elder Margaret Ireland offered final approval before submission for publication to *Applied Mobilities*.

Chapter 4: The research priorities were collaboratively conceived in partnership between Brandon Pludwinski, the Tłtsh'Éhkédélj First Nation Resource Management Coordinator Elder Margaret Ireland, Dr. Alex Latta, Julia Gyapay, and various Tłtsh'Éhkédélj Got'ie. Brandon Pludwinski conducted and transcribed the interviews and analyzed the data. The analysis was approved by Elder Margaret Ireland and Wellness Camp feedback session participants. Brandon Pludwinski wrote the chapter. Dr. Alex Latta, Dr. Sonia Wesche, and Julia Gyapay offered conceptual feedback and intellectual support. Elder Margaret Ireland will offer final approval before submission for publication.

Chapter 5: The research priorities were collaboratively conceived in partnership between Brandon Pludwinski, the Tłtsh'Éhkédélj First Nation Resource Management Coordinator Elder Margaret Ireland, Dr. Christine Gibb, Dr. Alex Latta, Julia Gyapay, and various Tłtsh'Éhkédélj Got'ie. Brandon Pludwinski conducted and transcribed the interviews and analyzed the data. The analysis was approved by Elder Margaret Ireland and Wellness Camp feedback session participants. Brandon Pludwinski wrote the chapter. Dr. Christine Gibb, Dr. Alex Latta, Dr. Sonia Wesche, and Julia Gyapay offered conceptual feedback and intellectual support. Elder Margaret Ireland offered final approval before submission for publication to *Studies in Social Justice*.

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Acronyms

ATV	All-Terrain Vehicle, or Quad
CBPAR	Community-Based Participatory Action Research
CCHAP	Climate Change Health and Adaptation Program
CHAP	Community Harvesters Assistance Program
CCPN	Climate Change Preparedness in the North
GNWT	Government of the Northwest Territories
IBNWT	Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IRP	Indigenous Research Paradigm
JMR	Jean Marie River
JMRFN	Jean Marie River First Nation
LNS	Louie Norwegian School
NWT	Northwest Territories
RMC	Resource Management Coordinator
SAO	Senior Administrative Officer
TFN	Tłtshets'ėhkédélį First Nation

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter is an introduction to the dissertation. It begins with an overview of im/mobility research to contextualize the research question and objectives and concludes with a brief introduction of the case study: Tł̨h̨t̨s'ė́hkédél̨j (Jean Marie River, Northwest Territories), a Dene community in the Dehcho Region, Northwest Territories.

Exploring im/mobility

Movement through time and space is a part of the human condition (Cresswell, 2010; Ferentzy, 2009). Yet, it wasn't until 2006 that this movement was recognized and categorized as a new field of inquiry, called the “mobility paradigm” (Hannam et al., 2006). Despite push-back on the novelty of the paradigm (see de Coninck, 2007; Randell, 2020; B. S. Turner, 2006), scholars agree that the field offers an important, critical orientation to the social, cultural, political, and economic relations that sustain and limit the movement of people, information, objects, and ideas (Baldwin et al., 2019; Büscher & Urry, 2009; Ferentzy, 2009). The “mobility paradigm,” which later evolved into the concept of “im/mobility” to explore the dynamic relationships between movement and stasis (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020), and then into “mobility justice” to investigate how systemic injustices are sustained and reproduced through movement and stasis (Sheller, 2018), prompted an ontological and epistemological rethinking of power and privilege, illuminating how different ways of knowing influence movement.

Im/mobility refers to the ways people move, or are restricted from moving, across land and space, and is shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors (Cresswell, 2010). In Indigenous¹

¹ I use the word “Indigenous” to reflect the shared understanding, histories, and worldviews maintained by diverse nations and communities while also acknowledging the diversity of Indigenous cultures and perspectives (Stewart, 2018).

contexts, im/mobility is deeply interwoven with histories, cultural practices, language, and values (Whyte et al., 2019). For example, seasonal rounds involve communities following traditional trails to hunting and harvesting locations, demonstrating that im/mobility is guided by ecological knowledge and cultural traditions (Davidson-Hunt & Berkes, 2004). At the same time, colonially imposed restrictions on movement, such as residential schools, physically removed young people and immobilized them to enforce settler ways of life (Coulthard, 2014; Lawrence, 2012). These examples illustrate the layered, dynamic interplay among historical, colonial, social, cultural, environmental, political, traditional, and spiritual dimensions at specific times and spaces that shape im/mobility practices (Farbotko, 2022; Taylor & Carson, 2009). Examining these dynamics can expose the uneven spatial and temporal relations that shape Indigenous im/mobility practices, many of which remain to be explored (Standfield, 2018).

Despite the widely accepted critical orientation in im/mobility justice research, an ongoing bias continues to prioritize Western contexts, focusing on rural-urban migration and economic im/mobility, rather than Indigenous relationships to land and seasonal movements (Ballantyne, 2018; Carey & Lydon, 2014; Prout, 2014). This bias limits the field's ability to integrate and conceptualize cultural specificity. Im/mobility justice seeks to confront these conceptual inequalities by examining how power, policy, and social norms restrict or enable movement, particularly for marginalized communities. Land-based teachings demonstrate movement guided by intergenerational Traditional Knowledge and ecological understanding, thereby exposing alternative social norms, practices, and relationships that facilitate movement through time and space (Whyte et al., 2019). These practices address culturally grounded nuances that shape alternative human-nature relationships, thereby offering more diverse and inclusive im/mobility theories (Carpio et al., 2022).

Within the Dene Nation, specifically in a place called Denendeh (translated to “land of the people” from the local language, Dene Zhatie), along the Dehcho (the Mackenzie River) is Tthets’éhk’édélį (also known as Jean Marie River). Traditionally, the Tthets’éhk’édélį Got’ie lived semi-nomadic lifestyles, seasonally travelling from camp to camp throughout the Dehcho Region.

Today, the Tthets’éhk’édélį Got’ie live in a relatively small community, which, at the time of this research, supported a population of approximately 63 residents (Statistics Canada, 2021). The First Nation’s vision statement reads:

We the Tthets’éhkédélį Got’ie (people downriver of McGill Lake), are proud of our Dene traditions, language, and beliefs. We value and respect the land, water, and animals that have sustained us for many generations. We shall continue to use and respect our natural resources. Building on the knowledge and skills of our people, we shall work together to create a healthy, sustainable future for ourselves and our children. We shall strive to find a balance between the traditional and modern ways of life. (Jean Marie River First Nation, n.d.)

The community’s balance between traditional and contemporary ways of life offers a compelling case study to enable exploration of Dene meanings associated with im/mobility. The community’s efforts to sustain physical, spiritual, emotional, and cultural connections to their ancestral spaces and cultural practices makes an ideal setting to explore the interplay between traditional and contemporary im/mobility.

This dissertation uses qualitative methodologies (including interviews, field observations, and reflexive journaling) to examine Indigenous im/mobility in a way that is relevant to the Tthets’éhk’édélį Got’ie. It reaffirms the importance of employing culturally grounded and respectful approaches that are rooted in ongoing relationships to gain new insights on im/mobility,

thereby extending the breadth and scope of im/mobility justice research to a northern, Indigenous community.

Research Aims, Question, and Objectives

This dissertation aims to examine Indigenous im/mobility in a manner that is ontologically and epistemologically relevant to the Tłtshé'éhk'édélį Got'ie in the Dehcho Region, Northwest Territories. It foregrounds Indigenous land-based perspectives and emphasizes the relational and politicized nature of im/mobility. The empirical focus will be on the daily and lived experiences of the Tłtshé'éhk'édélį Got'ie.

This dissertation is guided by the following research question: How do the Tłtshé'éhk'édélį Got'ie experience and give meaning to im/mobility as a relationally informed practice in the Dehcho Region?

The objectives of this research are:

1. to investigate the values that influence how Tłtshé'éhk'édélį Got'ie move through time and space, contributing to a culturally grounded framework to articulate im/mobility;
2. to foreground Indigenous relationships to land and climate change to understand how im/mobility functions as an embodied, relational practice; and
3. to examine how im/mobility operates as pedagogy amidst assertions of Indigenous sovereignty.

Contextualizing the Research

This section outlines the theoretical and contextual foundations of this dissertation. It provides an overview of im/mobility research, Indigenous im/mobility practices, colonial influence in the NWT, and the intersections of climate change and reciprocal practices. This section provides the theoretical scaffolding for the case study and analysis that follows, offering the conceptual grounding for analyzing relational im/mobility practices in the NWT.

Im/mobility

Humans have been moving around the world since time immemorial (Randell, 2020). It wasn't until the 19th century that scholars began conceptualizing and theorizing what drives people to move (McLeman & Gemenne, 2018). Ernst Georg Ravenstein (1870), a German-English geographer, was the first to theorize migration and resettlement patterns. Examining the rise of the industrial era, he noted that migration is most likely to occur from rural to urban settings and that it unfolds over time (Greenwood, 2019). Since Ravenstein's inaugural work, human geographers have theorized and adopted a series of models and approaches to study migration, focusing on human agency and social relations that shape movement and resettlement patterns (Preston & Ray, 2019; Rees & Lomax, 2019). Lee (1996, as cited by Black et al., 2011), for example, offered the push-pull model. This model primarily focuses on the longstanding socio-economic differences between places, caused by global inequities, to determine whether someone will migrate or not (Van Hear et al., 2018). Its binary approach draws on Western-informed theories of rationality to ask what pushes people away from a particular place and what pulls them towards somewhere new (Van Hear et al., 2018). This method of analysis problematically assumes that the body is passive to a form of Western binary rational determinism that is primarily economically driven (Schewel,

2019). In doing so, it tends “to ignore the broader context in which [migration decisions are made]” (Cooke & Bélanger, 2006, p. 142), including cultural, economic, gender, race, and ethnic nuances (Van Hear et al., 2018; Zickgraf, 2018).

To make sense of the complex, non-linear, and irregular migration decision outcomes, Black and colleagues (2011) proposed a new conceptual framework. Their framework is grounded in environmental, political, demographic, social, and economic drivers at global, national, regional, and local scales and intervening age, sex, education, marital status, language and religious nuances (Black et al., 2011). Ultimately, their work shows that migration involves ongoing decision making based on complex, changing, and often uncertain intersectional identity markers, before, during, and after the act of migration (Swapan & Sadeque, 2021).

Despite this growing recognition of complexity, scholars have critiqued early migration frameworks for continuing to rely on binary migration-non-migration outcomes (Cooke & Bélanger, 2006; Schewel, 2019). Rather than categorizing people as simply migrating or staying in place, research shows that individuals often engage in both outcomes simultaneously, adjusting their mobility strategies in response to intersecting social, economic, cultural, and political factors (Cooke & Bélanger, 2006; Schewel, 2019). Mobility decisions, therefore, are fluid and involve ongoing spatial and temporal redistributions of humans, information, and objects through time and space (Baldwin et al., 2019; Büscher & Urry, 2009; Ferentzy, 2009). This prompted a broader conceptual shift towards the relational ebbs and flows of movement and stasis at multiple scales, moving away from migration and non-migration binary approaches (Boas et al., 2022; Cooke & Bélanger, 2006).

Sheller and Urry (2006) coined the “new mobility paradigm,” an orientation to social science research rooted in questions, theories, and methodologies that respond to the “hybrid geographies...that contingently enable people and materials to move” (p. 215). It is driven by complex desires to understand how intersecting identity markers (such as class, gender, ethnicity/race, age, language, etc.) intrinsically shape global and local embodiments of movement through time and space (Götz & Sunderer, 2020; Manderscheid, 2020). To do so, it scrutinizes the social, cultural, political, and economic relations that stem from peoples, information, and objects on the move (Baldwin et al., 2019; Büscher & Urry, 2009; Ferentzy, 2009; Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006).

Yet, the novelty of the “new mobility paradigm” has been subject to scrutiny by several scholars (de Coninck, 2007; B. S. Turner, 2006) who argue that “movements of one kind or another have been at the heart of all kinds of social science...since their inception” (Randell, 2020, p. 207). In fact, much early scholarship has been focused on both Western and non-Western histories that show how people, ideas, information, and objects, including money, have been continuously moving through time and space, particularly through the ongoing histories of colonization, globalization, and trade (Cresswell, 2010; Ferentzy, 2009).

Despite these valid critiques, the early 2000s have been undeniably marked by advances in globalization and technological progress, offering unprecedented waves of mobility alongside forms of immobility (Adey, 2009). These and subsequent waves include increased displacement caused by war and conflict, transportation technologies that enabled increases in tourism and refugee flows, and intense global mobility and immobility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

(Adey, 2017; Mostafanezhad et al., 2020). As a result, scholars maintain that the merit of mobility studies lies in its ability to help unpack everyday lived experiences that shape and give meaning to routine, patterned, and practiced ways of life (Manderscheid, 2014; Sheller, 2018; Vannini & Jensen, 2020).

Mobility research acknowledges that people, objects, information, or ideas can be mobile in one domain yet rendered immobile in another (Adey, 2006). Mobility, therefore, is a relational practice tethered to experiences and moments of both mobility and immobility. To account for the relational context in which mobility and immobility occur, scholars have been using the term ‘im/mobility,’ where the slash represents the intertwined, mutually correlative nature of both movement and stasis (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020). Sheller (2018) wrote that im/mobilities are “meant to signal that mobility and immobility are always connected, relational, and co-dependent” and that they should be considered “dynamic constellations of multiple scales, simultaneous practices, and relational meanings” (p. 1).

Scholars agree that im/mobility is not evenly practiced, it is determined by uneven distributions of resources, opportunities, and abilities that are contingent upon social interactions and political processes (Massey, 1994; Sheller, 2018). Scholars have since adopted a critical orientation to im/mobility, exploring the unique socio-political contexts that shape im/mobility (see Jensen, 2011; Manderscheid, 2014). This critical approach has illuminated the ways that “mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power” (Massey, 1994, p. 150). Thus, im/mobility offers a strong entry point to explore broader social and political relations that shape lived experiences (Adey, 2009; Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006).

Sheller (2018) proposed “mobility justice,” a critical im/mobilities approach that “tracks the effects of inequalities in mobilities across various connected sites and scales [to] show how

justice itself is a mobile assemblage of contingent subjects, enacted contexts, and fleeting moments of practice and political engagement” (p. 20). The intersection of im/mobility and justice exposes the structural inequalities among class, gender, culture, race, sex, space, and climate inherent to im/mobility (Sheller, 2020; Wiegel et al., 2019). Conceptually, it forces an ontological reconsideration of power, privilege, and resources and reframes questions of what shapes im/mobilities to ask how individual ontological and epistemological needs are met through im/mobility (Sheller, 2018). This can offer alternative perspectives on what it means to have or interact with power in the context of im/mobility (Nikolaeva et al., 2019; Sheller, 2018). To expose alternative perspectives, I turn to the literature on Indigenous im/mobility. In doing so, I highlight how im/mobility is a culturally embodied practice that is connected to land-based knowledge.

Indigenous Communities and Im/mobility

Historically, North American Indigenous Peoples have depended on ongoing and alternating states of movement and stasis across their territories in order to ensure their spiritual, cultural, mental, and physical survival (Newton et al., 2005; Standfield, 2018; Taylor & Carson, 2009), and to support their senses of self and belonging (Donald, 2021). Existing research on Indigenous im/mobility reveals a blurred line between the notion of fixed and mobile communities (Ballantyne, 2018), and instead articulates a form of community whose physicality coincides with the broader annual ebbs and flows of the land throughout the seasons (Todd, 2016). This is most commonly associated with the concept of seasonal rounds, the annually cyclical pattern of movement that see communities and people returning to similar spaces at similar times of the year (Davidson-Hunt & Berkes, 2004). These rounds help sustain an ecological balance, ensuring that

available resources aren't depleted or overharvested (Davidson-Hunt & Berkes, 2004; Kassam et al., 2021). These im/mobile communities followed (and to some degree, still follow) seasonal resource availability and relied on both semi-permanent and permanent camps, or agglomerations of housing structures (Helm, 1961; Sletto et al., 2021), to offer a deep connection to Indigenous lands, language, identity, and local socio-environmental and political contexts (Whyte et al., 2019). As such, im/mobility is foundational to Indigenous survival, culture, wellbeing, and land-based relations (Bräuchler & Ménard, 2017; Salazar & González, 2021).

For many Indigenous Peoples and communities, the land is a source of life, culture, identity, and spirit (Cluderay et al., 2022; Galway et al., 2022). It forms the ontological and epistemological foundation through which knowledge is understood, experienced, and shared (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017). Within land-based worldviews, humans and non-humans are understood to exist in reciprocal relationships based on mutual respect (Atleo & Boron, 2022). These relationships derive from the teachings offered by the land, sun, water, sky, and Creation, and form the philosophical underpinnings, knowledge, worldviews, and practices, including im/mobility (Simpson, 2017), of many Indigenous Nations (Absolon, 2010). In this sense, the land is not only a physical place upon which humans and non-humans reside or move across; it is the sacred living foundation upon which Indigenous cultures, communities, and Peoples live (Watts, 2013).

Im/mobility, and the relational, Indigenous practices it enables, continues to be challenged by ongoing colonial processes that threaten Indigenous Peoples, including their sovereignty (Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019). Specifically, colonial governments sought control over lands and resources through the commodification of land to generate profit, the imposition of institutions such as residential schools, policies that undermined Indigenous political economies and

relationships to land, the dispossession of women's and queer peoples' rights to land and community membership, and the creation of reserve communities (Coulthard, 2014; Lawrence, 2012; Watts, 2013). This also includes forced relocations, in which communities, including Inuit communities, were forcibly removed from their traditional lands, and resettled elsewhere (Dombrowski et al., 2016; Healey, 2016). These practices and policies, sanctioned as legal by settler governments, imposed Western epistemological and ontological understandings of land, community, governance, and economics, thereby altering Indigenous temporal, spatial, and land relations (R. Hall, 2013; Kubik et al., 2009).

Indigenous Experiences, Colonial Legality, and Im/mobility

To better understand the social, political, and cultural context from which this research emerges, it is necessary to explore the history of what is now known as the Northwest Territories, Canada. Western societies have maintained fundamentally different assumptions about, and relationships to, land compared to Indigenous societies. At their core, Western ontologies privilege a binary and hierarchical distinction between humans and the land (Cronon, 1996). Colonization, including the ongoing processes of settler-colonization, aims to reorganize people and communities in relation to the pursuit of capital, reframing lands primarily for their resource potential (Harris, 2004; Toomey, 2022). This reorganization underpins a worldview that enables extractive and dominating relationships with the land for human benefit (Harvey, 2014; Randall & Ironside, 1996). Reterritorialization projects—including energy and infrastructural development (Luby, 2020), recreation and park development (Baldwin et al., 2011; Braun, 2002; Cronon, 1996), and resource extraction (Fumoleau, 2004; R. Hall, 2013; Harris, 2004)—have disrupted ongoing Indigenous relationships to land, life, and culture (Coulthard, 2014). In this view, the settler-

colonial gaze imposes self-serving perspectives on land—including animals, plants, and water—as commodities meant to be exploited for exploitation (Harris, 2004), thereby hierarchically placing nature below humans.

Prior to the arrival of French explorer Jacques Cartier in 1534, who was sent to “discover” new lands (Litalien, 2025; McNeil, 2024), First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities had sustained complex and enduring communities, living on and with their territories since time immemorial (Coulthard, 2014). The Dene, more specifically, lived in constant states of im/mobility, travelling throughout Denendeh in accordance with seasonal changes, species migration patterns, intergenerational relations, and spiritual practices (Blondin, 1977). Through medicine powers, Dene men and women communicated with the more-than-human world and travelled vast distances in short amounts of time; however, dangers remained present in everyday life (Blondin, 1997). Giant animals roamed the land, and humans and animals could shift forms, instilling fear and uncertainty among the Dene People (Blondin, 1997). Despite these dangers, the Dene continued to live from the land, maintaining deep relationships with its rhythms and teachings (Blondin, 1997). As Dene Elder George Blondin (1997) explains, a powerful being named Yamoria was sent to the earth by the Creator to help the Dene People. Yamoria travelled throughout the territory, listening to the challenges people faced and working to alleviate them (Blondin, 1997). He fought large, dangerous animals to protect the people and passed on the Dene Laws, ensuring that humans and non-humans lived in respectful, reciprocal harmony (Blondin, 1997). Yamoria’s teachings encode instructions on Dene movements, including where to go, when, and how. The teachings reflect a legal and moral framework that shapes Dene im/mobility practices and is grounded in land-based relationships and knowledge (Blondin, 1997).

Disregarding the history, depth, and complexity of Dene communities, when Cartier arrived in what is now known as North America in 1534, he sought to conquer and colonize lands. His voyage and claims of discovery were legitimized under the premise of the Doctrine of Discovery: the Euro-Catholic premise that any Christian person or state had the right of authority over “discovered” lands and bodies (Asch, 2002; Miller, 2010; Smith, 2021). This doctrine discursively positioned Europeans as the rightful owners of Indigenous lands (Erickson, 2015) and managers of Indigenous bodies (Wolfe, 2006).

In the Northwest Territories, as in the rest of the world, colonial expansion occurred alongside the discovery and development of natural resources (R. J. Hall, 2022). The fur trade was initiated in Canada in the late 1670’s and made its way to the North around 1719 (Blondin, 1997). It later dominated the northern economy in the early 1800s, bringing an increasing number of settlers to Denendeh (Fumoleau, 2004). This marked the beginning of a trade-based economy for many Dene communities (Blondin, 1997), shifting aspects of their livelihood from the land-based subsistence to centralized spaces of commerce, thereby assigning trade and monetary value to the knowledge and resources the land provides (Southcott & Natcher, 2018).

The fur trade significantly impacted Dene im/mobility practices. When the first trading post was established on the shores of Tucho (Great Slave Lake), trappers from as far as Łíídljį Kúé (328 km by river) travelled there to trade (Blondin, 1997). The Dene were eager to trade for goods such as knives, axes, sewing needles, coffee, tea, sugar, and flour (Blondin, 1997). Over time, more people spent extended periods near the trading post, as hunting and trapping closer to the post facilitated easier fur transport. This led to the gradual geographic reorganization and semi-permanent settlement of communities, resulting in reduced seasonal im/mobility as proximity to trading posts, rather than land-based relations, became key determinants of survival (Blondin,

1997). By the mid-1800's, European influence on North America expanded beyond the fur trade. The smallpox and influenza epidemics profoundly impacted population and im/mobility dynamics in Denendeh, devastating communities (Piper & Sandlos, 2007). In 1852, the first Catholic priest arrived in the Northwest Territories and a missionary was set up in Deninu Kúé (Fort Resolution) in 1856 (Blondin, 1997), and the first residential school opened in 1867. The opening of schools forced youth to travel long distances, often leaving their home for months at a time (Thielen-Wilson, 2014). These non-voluntary movements had profound impacts on family structures, the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, and reshaped Dene im/mobility dynamics (Mountain, 2019). Moreover, they set the stage for confederation in 1867, laying the foundation for treaties, land claims, and policies that would continue to shape Dene im/mobility and territorial governance.

In 1867, the British North America Act was passed, outlining the powers and responsibilities of the newly formed government of Canada, including their jurisdiction over Indigenous Peoples and their lands (Coulthard, 2014). Nine years later, the Indian Act (1876)—a consolidated document that merged various colonial legislative policies—was passed into law. The Indian Act sought to exert heteropatriarchal, colonial, and genocidal control over Indigenous lands and bodies, including im/mobility (Collis, 2022; Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017). Scholars have argued that its broad objective was to assimilate First Nations land and bodies into the settler-colonial Canadian state while undermining Indigenous governance and autonomy, including im/mobility (Coulthard, 2010, 2014; Kubik et al., 2009). This often took form through the creation of permanent settlements, police detachments, health centers, and family allowances that further immobilized the Dene in place (Coulthard, 2014).

Together, the British North America Act and the Indian Act established the ideological and legal foundations for colonial expansion into the Northwest Territories—which were and continue to be the homeland of Inuit, First Nation, and Métis communities, including the Dene, Tłı̨chǫ, Gwich'in, and Inuvialuit (Fumoleau, 2004). These nations have long exercised, and continue to exercise, their own governance, legal, economic, and political systems of their land. A few years later, in 1896, gold was discovered around Sòmba K'è, prompting treaty negotiations with the Yellowknives Dene First Nation (Fumoleau, 2004). This led to a series of ongoing mining projects and associated challenges that continue to impact the northern communities (Beckett, 2021), generating local employment opportunities (R. J. Hall, 2022) and widespread environmental challenges (Beckett, 2021). In the 1920s, the discovery of oil shifted the colonial gaze to Tłęgòhł (Norman Wells, in the northern part of the Mackenzie Valley). Imperial Oil (a petroleum company) established a local refinery (Fallas et al., 2025) with pipelines that crossed traditional hunting and trapping areas frequently used by local harvesters (Paul Dana et al., 2009). Shortly thereafter, the Government of Canada began treaty negotiations with the Dene in attempt to regulate and benefit from the economic promise of oil.

In 1921, Treaty 11 was signed with the goal of “extinguishing Indian title” to land and declaring ownership in the name of the settler-government (Fumoleau, 2004, p. 3), thereby offering economic wealth and prosperity to the settler nation (R. Hall, 2013). This colonial goal stands in contrast to the shared understanding of peace and friendship as the context within which Dene leaders offered their signatures and support (Asch, 2013). Yet, Dene oral histories suggest that lands were not ceded during the negotiations (Asch, 2013; Fumoleau, 2004). These contrasting interpretations of the past have led to present-day struggles for rights, recognition, and sovereignty, including access to lands and resources (Asch, 2013; Coulthard, 2014).

In 1969, the Government of Canada proposed the “White Paper” on Indian Policy. The paper, never to become policy or law in that form, proposed to dissolve the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and shift the responsibility to the provinces and two territories—in effect, wiping out the government’s constitutional duty towards First Nations in Canada (Coulthard, 2014). It would end reserves and status. In response, several chiefs from across the NWT unified “to protect the rights and interests of the Dene [including Métis] under treaty” (Dene Nation, n.d.). They called themselves “the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories (IBNWT)”, which later became the Dene Nation in 1978 (Dene Nation, n.d.). The Dene Nation as a political entity has been an instrumental force in advocating for Dene rights to land, which they advocated for in their publication, *The Dene Declaration* (1975), a document calling for the recognition of Dene sovereignty (Dene Nation, n.d.). This document declared the Dene were a Nation that could enter nation-to-nation negotiations over sovereignty and land rights with the Government of Canada (Coulthard, 2014).

The political momentum generated by The Dene Declaration intersected with broader debates over northern resource development, particularly the proposed Mackenzie Valley Pipeline and the subsequent Berger Inquiry, fundamentally reshaping Indigenous-state relations in the Northwest Territories. The Berger Inquiry, led by Justice Thomas Berger, investigated the social, environmental, and economic impacts of a proposed gas pipeline that would connect the Arctic gas fields to refineries in Alberta, passing through the Northwest Territories. His findings, based on oral testimony from Dene, Inuvialuit, and Métis Elders, land-users, and Chiefs, concluded that the pipeline project should not proceed; rather, the government should take time to resolve the ongoing land claims (Coulthard, 2014). This marked a critical turning point in Indigenous-settler relations, as it legitimized oral Indigenous testimony as authoritative evidence, affirmed the

importance of environmental protection and cultural survival, and recognized historical examples of immobility as land-use and land-based knowledge (Coulthard, 2014). In addition, it represented a moment of collective Indigenous political mobilization, in which unified leadership asserted a shared position on land rights, sovereignty, environmental stewardship, and self-determination (Coulthard, 2014).

Yet, the unified voice that the Dene Nation sought to represent proved to be too diverse in geography, needs, and political priorities for a single governing body and voice to represent (Dene Nation, n.d.). Nations and groups, including what became the Métis Nation, separated from the Dene Nation and began to negotiate their own agreements and claims with the Governments of Canada and the Northwest Territories. As George Barnaby, a Dene politician from Fort Good Hope, explained, “The land claim is our fight to gain recognition as a different group of people—with our own way of seeing things, our own values, our own lifestyle, our own laws... [It] is a fight for self-determination...” (Barnaby et al., 1977). Currently, within the NWT, there are four settled modern land claim agreements (the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, 1984; the Gwich’in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement, 1992; Sahtú Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement, signed 1993 and enforced 1994; and the Tłı̨chǫ Land Claims and Self-Government Agreement, 2003). There remain two outstanding negotiations—the Dehcho and Akaitcho claims (Figure 1).

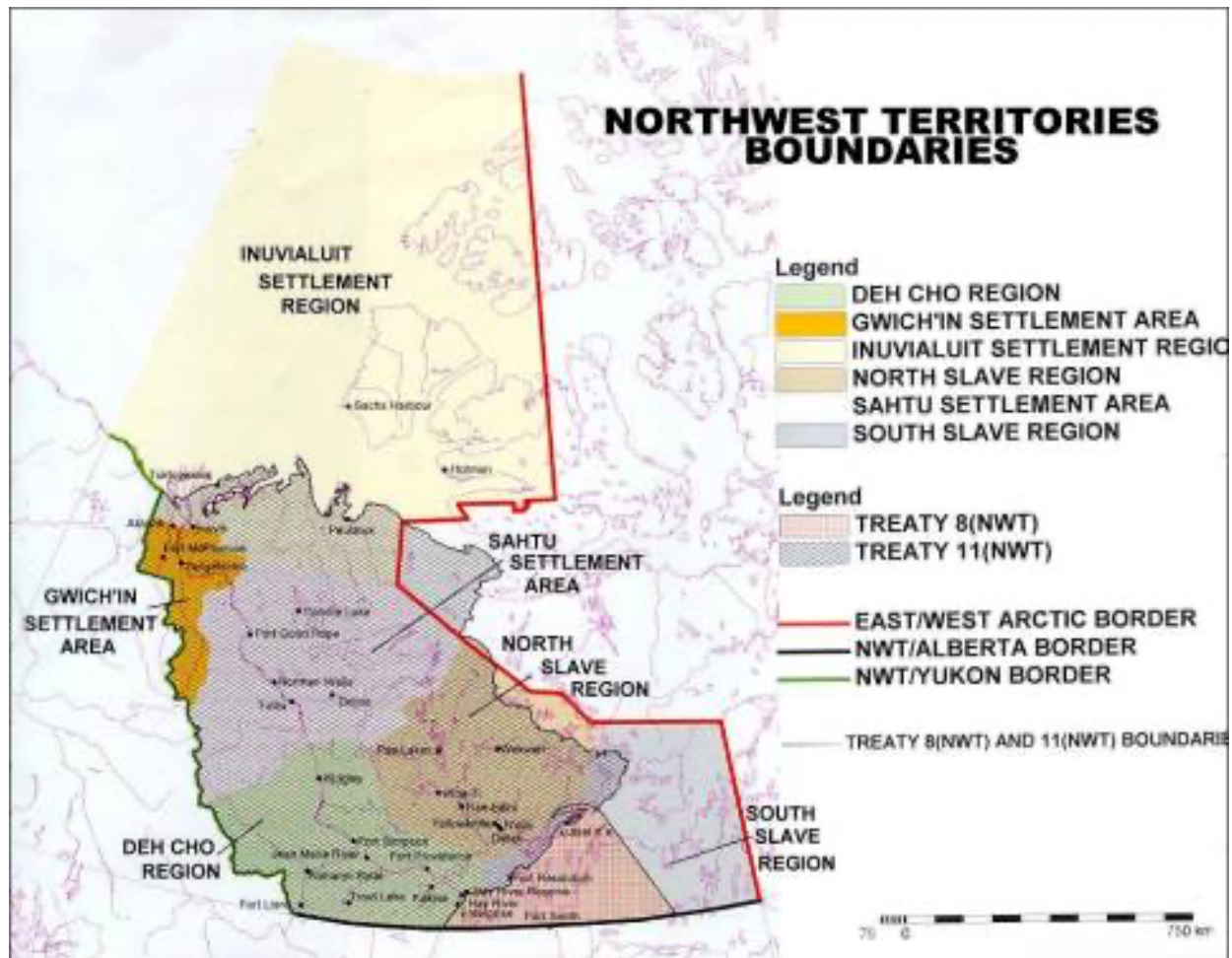


Figure 1: Map of NWT treaty and nation boundaries (Levan & Kalemi Consultants, 2003).

Land claims negotiations in the Dehcho Region remain ongoing to this day. In the late 1990s, the Dehcho Dene Chiefs (unified under the name Dehcho First Nations), the Government of Canada, and the Government of the Northwest Territories began negotiations on land jurisdiction, resource development, and governance (Vandermale & Mason, 2024). The Dehcho Dene have consistently emphasized that Treaty 11 should be interpreted as a living agreement, one that preserves reciprocal use of the land opposed to one that employs static boundaries (Asch, 2013; Coulthard, 2014). The Crown—federal and territorial—governments, on the other hand, approach the negotiations under Canada's Comprehensive Land Claims Policy, seeking clear distinctions between Dene land and resources and Crown and resources (Alcantara, 2008).

From the Dehcho Dene perspective, this approach represents a colonial attempt to restructure land relations in a way that threatens Dene jurisdiction and sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014), including land/mobility sovereignty. As a result, the Dehcho Dene Land Claim negotiations remain ongoing.

Anthropogenic Climate Change

In addition to the political challenges associated with the rights to land imposed by colonial law, widespread global environmental and climate changes have been threatening Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land and water (Whyte, 2017a). In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) proclaimed Arctic and Subarctic regions as global environmental and climate change hotspots (Ford et al., 2013). Scientific evidence has since confirmed that Arctic and Subarctic ecosystems are experiencing unprecedented environmental changes linked to human activity (Box et al., 2019). In recent years, scholars have studied the impacts of climate warming on various biophysical phenomena in the North, including increasingly rapid permafrost thaw (Carpino et al., 2018; Swindles et al., 2015), rising sea levels (Moon et al., 2018), increasing wildfire frequency and intensity (Dodd et al., 2018; Fazel-Rastgar & Sivakumar, 2022), increasing presence of invasive species that threaten local vegetation (Pearson et al., 2013), and changing hydrological cycles and systems (Wrona et al., 2016). These changes have disrupted the reciprocal, land-based relationships that sustain plants, animals, and those in relationship with them (Pearce et al., 2010; van Luijk et al., 2021, 2022). Moreover, the impacts of climate and environmental changes are intensified by the various stresses that shape life in the North (Lede et al., 2021), including colonization (Whyte, 2017b). These changes are experienced through intersecting social identities and structural conditions, such as age, class, culture, ability, gender, economic stability, citizenship, and property ownership (Barnett, 2020; Farbotko et al., 2020; M. D. Turner, 2016).

Contemporary Indigenous Im/mobility Methods

Despite the historic and ongoing changes and pressures imposed on Indigenous lands and Peoples, respectful and reciprocal land-based relationships have been maintained through im/mobility practices (Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019). That is, Indigenous Peoples have been able to embody the long-standing relationships that prioritize the wellbeing of humans and non-humans, including plants, animals, the water, sky, and land, through various im/mobility practices, including walking (Donald, 2021; Sletto et al., 2021), use of dog teams (Baker et al., 2020; Laugrand & Oosten, 2002), and boating (including canoeing and kayaking (Chapman, 2021)), and after the introduction of motorized vehicles (including all-terrain vehicles, skidoos, trucks, and boats (Lede et al., 2021; Lévesque, 2011; Sacco, 2020)). In the remainder of this section, I briefly outline four key contemporary Indigenous im/mobility methods: walking, dog teams, canoes, and motorized vehicles, demonstrating the more-than-physical dimensions of im/mobility that contextualize the following case-study.

Walking, for example, is not only a mode of transportation. It is an embodied practice that fosters “relational renewal” with the self, community, culture, spirits, and land (Donald, 2021, p. 55). Ojibwe Elder Edward Benton-Banai draws on Anishinaabe creation stories to explain that Nanabozho’s (part man, part powerful spirit, and the personification of life’s forces) first task was to “walk in such a way ‘that each step is a greeting to mother earth’” (1988, as cited by Kimmerer, 2013, p. 207). The slow and repetitive nature of walking, paired with the physical connection of body and the ground, enables a flow of energy, or spirit, between the walker and the land that transcends the mere act of physical movement through time and space (Macauley, 2001). Walking, in other words, facilitates a spiritual exchange between the body and a higher being that can be enacted and paused by movement and stasis on the land (Donald, 2021). For the Dene, walking is

no different. It is an experience that “binds narrative to the acquisition of personal knowledge...re-establishing the relation between place, story, and all the beings who use the locale” (Legat, 2012, p. 175). Walking, therefore, is more than a means of connection; it is a practice through which Dene People locate their rightful place on their land in relation to all beings and knowledge (Legat, 2012).

Similar to walking, the historic use of dog teams extends im/mobility relations beyond the physical act of moving through time and space. Dog teams are far more than practical tools for covering vast distances in the winter; they are an important part of Indigenous im/mobility traditions (Hamilton, 2023). They enable hunters, trappers, and harvesters to safely move through the winter bush by carving their own path over snow and ice (Hamilton, 2023; Jarvenpa, 2024). Dogs, furthermore, offer protection and companionship during movements of stasis by barking to signal approaching dangerous game, like wolves or bears (Baker et al., 2020; Roberts, 2017). Pi Kennedy, a Métis land-user from Fort Smith, recalls his experiences with dog teams, noting that the teams travel quietly enough to sneak up upon moose and will get you out of the water if you fall through the ice (Hamilton, 2023). At the heart of Kennedy’s experience with the dog teams is a sustained relational accountability to each other: “if you look after your dogs,” he explains, “they’ll get you home even if it’s tough” (Hamilton, 2023, p. 91).

Canoes, too, are products of a dynamic interplay among culture, movement, and identity. (Brown et al., 2021). In present-day Canada, the canoe has emerged as a culturally loaded and appropriated symbol (Erickson, 2015). It has entered the settler world and become a critical piece of leisure technology (Pludwinski & Grimwood, 2021). Despite its Indigenous roots (Gidmark, 2023; Grant, 1988), the canoe remains a heavily appropriated technology that has enabled settler violence through the dispossession, penetration, and reterritorialization of Indigenous lands (Dean,

2018; Erickson, 2015). Yet, for many Indigenous Peoples and communities, canoes are living vessels that encompass spirituality, ceremony, and identity (Erickson & Wylie Krotz, 2021). Not only are they agents through which People can develop and sustain relationships with the land, food, culture, and spirits (Sioui & McLeman, 2014), they are vessels of social and cultural resurgence and Traditional Knowledge (Zoe & Dunkin, 2021).

By the 1970s, skidoos and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) had become well established in the Northwest Territories (Beaulieu, 2012). This displaced dog teams and added another layer of im/mobility to the North. Motorized transportation technologies have helped harvesters go farther and quicker into the bush, accessing new land and animals to continue practicing traditional ways of life (Lede et al., 2021). Yet, motorized off-road vehicles are not without their challenges. They are loud pieces of technology that are often blamed for scaring away animals, making hunting more difficult (Mertens, 2016; Sacco, 2020). In addition, they can require daily maintenance and can break down in cold temperatures (Mertens, 2016). High monetary costs are required to repair and fuel them, quickly diminishing the potential return on investment (Naylor et al., 2021).

Together, walking, dog-teams, canoes, and motorized vehicles begin to illustrate the relational and reciprocal value of im/mobility in Indigenous societies. They show how movement involves relations of reciprocity and responsibility that offer important tools to navigate changing landscapes and conditions. By situating Indigenous im/mobility practices, historical and ongoing structures of colonial violence, and climate change within im/mobility theory, this chapter establishes core elements of the dissertation's conceptual framework. The synergies among these elements help orient im/mobility as a culturally grounded, ecologically responsive, and politically charged practice. In the next section, I outline the Tł̨t̨s'ėhk'édél̨ case study, briefly outlining the

community's history and relationship with the core elements that theoretically ground this dissertation.

Case Study: Tthets'éhk'édélj

Tthets'éhk'édélj² was selected as a case study for this research due to existing relationships and community interest in its complex and ongoing history of im/mobility. The community has deep-rooted histories of seasonal movement through their traditional territory for hunting, harvesting, and fishing practices, reflecting a deep knowledge of the land and the cultural and spiritual connections that sustain them. Despite these connections, community members also navigate historic and ongoing colonial policies and environmental pressures that alter and restrict their im/mobility. In response, community members continue to assert their presence, rebuilding after disasters and maintaining land-based practices, exposing the layers of experience, co-evolution, and impacts of colonization and climate change that shape everyday lived experiences.

In the 1920's, an Elder in the Tthets'éhk'édélj area, Elder Gabe, suggested to then Chief Louie Norwegian that people settle at the confluence. His suggestion was based on increasing governmental pressures that encouraged settlement, and on the premise that a fixed location would help the band develop economically and benefit from opportunities related to a growing settler society in Denendeh, while still being spatially removed enough from settler society to maintain their Dene ways of life. The suggested location, the confluence of the Dehcho and Jean Marie River, was a familiar place that already housed three log cabins and was a part of some people's

² There are several translations available for Tthets'éhk'édélj, including 'the place downriver of the sparking rock', 'the place downriver of McGill Lake', 'water flowing over clay', and Jean Marie River. For the purposes of this research, we use "the place downriver of McGill Lake" as it is commonly used by those in the community.

seasonal camps and offered plentiful moose, beavers, berries, jackfish, and grayling, thus ensuring local food security and sovereignty at all seasons.

The confluence (Figure 2) is 68 kilometers by river south of Łíídljį Kúę (a fixed regional hub with a large settler presence, complete with community halls, schools, a federal administration center, and a trading post) that community members could still maintain a traditional Dene lifestyle while still benefiting from Western influences. By the mid-1920's, an increasing number of families had made their way to the confluence, and the community began to form, later taking on the name Tłhets'ėhk'édélį (Jean Marie River, or JMR).

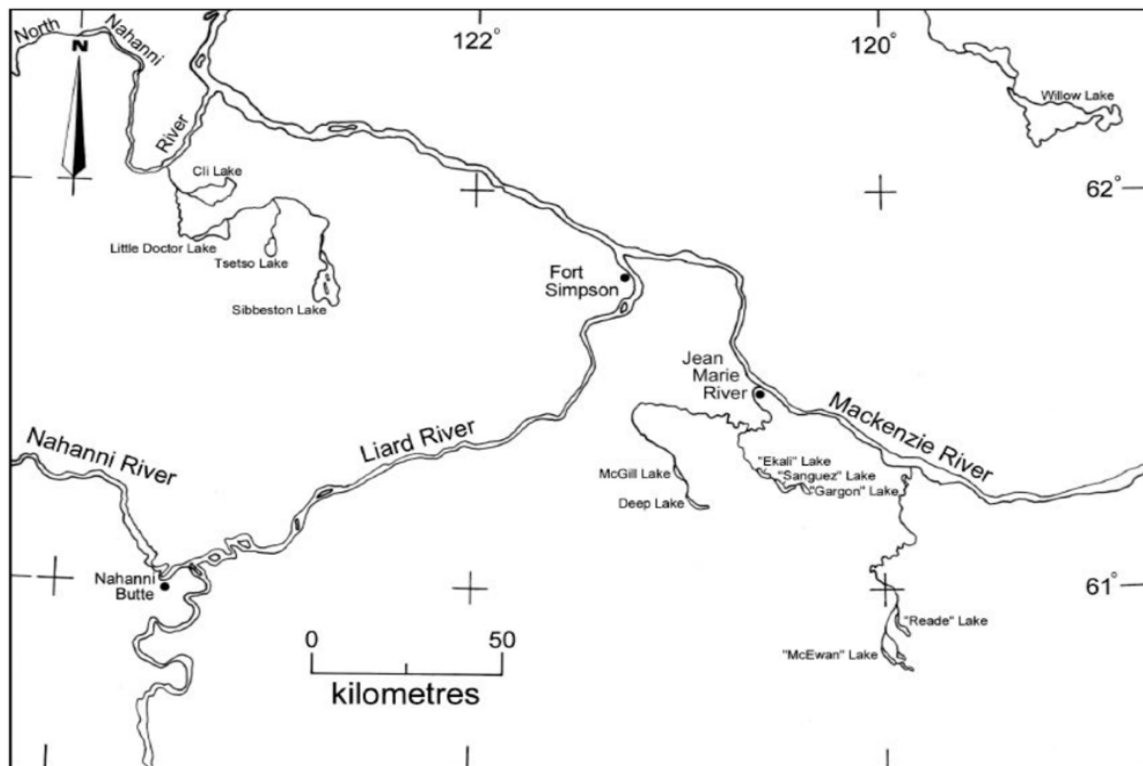


Figure 2: Map of Jean Marie River (Stewart et al., 2003).

In the 1940s, when state and church officials reached Tthets'ėhk'édėłı to legally enroll and take the youth in the residential school in Łíídlıı Kúé, Chief Norwegian refused³. To compromise, he led the construct of a school and found state-approved teachers—anthropologists from Trent University who were interested in finding a northern community to research, June Helm and Teresa Carterette⁴ (Morritt-Jacobs, 2020). The state approved, and the anthropologist-teachers moved to Tthets'ėhk'édėłı. When the students reached middle school (roughly 12 years of age), they were sent either to Sacred Heart Residential School (operated 1906 – 1960 in Deh Gáh Got'ıę, Fort Providence) or to Lapointe Hall (operated from 1960-1988 in Łíídlıı Kúé), both Catholic residential school where their knowledge, connections to their land, way of life, and sense of self were challenged. Today, youth can attend school in Tthets'ėhk'édėłı until the ninth grade (roughly 14 years of age), after which they are often required to attend Łíídlıı Kúé Secondary School, a publicly funding school in another community, to complete their studies.

Later, in the early 1950's, Chief Norwegian recommended that his community engage in the Western economy, selling timber and offering transportation services (via tugboat and dog team) to the growing settler population in Łíídlıı Kúé (Jean Marie River First Nation, n.d.). This helped ensure that community members could earn a monetary wage and benefit from the goods and services offered by settler industries, including the trading post, in Łíídlıı Kúé. Presently,

³ Many state-sanctioned Indigenous assimilation attempts in Canada occurred through the residential school system (Park, 2015). The Canadian residential school system separated Indigenous youth from their families and communities to assimilate them (through force, physical-, mental-, and sexual-abuse, coercion, and education) into settler-European culture (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These schools relied on forced mobility and relocation of youth from their families and communities. Many of those who survived the schools were left with social, cultural, physical, emotional, and linguistic wounds, many of which sustain intergenerationally (Barker et al., 2019; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

⁴ One of the published works from this era of research was June Helm's, "The Lynx Point People: The Dynamics of a Northern Athapaskan Band" (1961). It is ill received by many community members. Criticisms focus on the researcher's misinterpretations, assumptions, and simplifications of Dene life and practices.

neither the sawmill nor the tugboat are operational and instead band members often find employment through the band office, the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT), the federal government, the guardianship program, the mining industry, and other public and private opportunities in Denendeh and Canada.

The Tłtshets'ėhk'édélı Got'ie are also confronting the challenges of climate change (Camels et al., 2015). In recent years (2021 and 2023), the community has faced several rapid-onset environmental hazards, including flooding and wildfires, that have forced two evacuations of the community. With little warning, residents have been forced out of their homes to Deh Gáh Got'ıę, 256 kilometers away, to await a safe return home.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced the research by outlining the research aim, question, and objectives. It briefly discussed key social, political, and historical dimensions that continue to shape life in the Northwest Territories and briefly introduced the academic literature that contextualizes this research.

Chapter 2 focuses on the reflexive methodology that grounded this research. It begins with an introduction of both Western and Indigenous research paradigms and explains the relational and ethical approach and methods that guide this dissertation. The chapter ends with an explanation of how this research has been shared back with the community and a brief acknowledgement of the methodological limitations.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 have been prepared as stand-alone manuscripts for peer-reviewed publication. Chapter 3, “Staying, moving, and knowing: Relational im/mobility in Tłtshets'ėhk'édélı First Nation” addresses the first research objective. It outlines how connecting with the land,

subsistence autonomy, and the transmission of Traditional Knowledge underscore Tłtsets' éhkédélį practices and meanings of im/mobility. Chapter 4, "Exploring relationality in climate im/mobility: A study of Tłtsets' éhkédélį First Nation im/mobility" responds to the second research objective. It outlines how movement and stasis are shaped by embodied relationships to land which evolve alongside cultural continuity overtime. Chapter 5, "Indigenous im/mobility: Sovereignty, pedagogy, and resistance" responds to the third research objective. It explores how im/mobility is a culturally and politically grounded practice that impacts land-based sovereignty. Each of the manuscripts was collaboratively written with community partners, academic partners, and my academic supervisors, all of whom have been acknowledged for their contributions.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation. It summarizes key findings and themes from the dissertation and discusses the applied, methodological, and theoretical contributions offered by this work. It concludes by outlining future research directions.

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Figure 3: Towards Marilyn's, by Sophie Rivers

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter outlines the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological foundations of this dissertation. It begins with an overview of my conceptual approach, which I articulate through a metaphor of the water cycle. This metaphor offers a cyclical, relational, and embodied approach through which I can trace my flow of ideas, consciousness, and evolution of knowledge. Grounded in the notion that research is influenced by the relations we carry (Kovach, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021b; Wilson, 2008), the chapter begins by outlining my conceptual framework and coinciding methods to highlight the philosophical, relational, and ethical platforms from which I enter and engage with this work.

The Water Cycle

Research is laden with power imbalances that stem from the assumptions, perspectives, and ideologies that researchers carry with them and into their work (Kovach, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021a). Acknowledging these assumptions, perspectives, and ideologies can expose the power relations and dynamics that are both rejected and sustained through research practices (Sanderson & Allard, 2003). To highlight my path through this research and the assumptions I carry with me, I showcase my conceptual approach through the cyclical roadmap of the water cycle. It represents how I make sense of the world and the ideas that guide this work, both of which impact the logics that guide my research choices and practices. As such, the water cycle metaphor not only provides a structure to my thinking, but it also offers a flexible, values-driven conceptual framework grounded in responsiveness, reflection, growth, and flow (Figure 4).

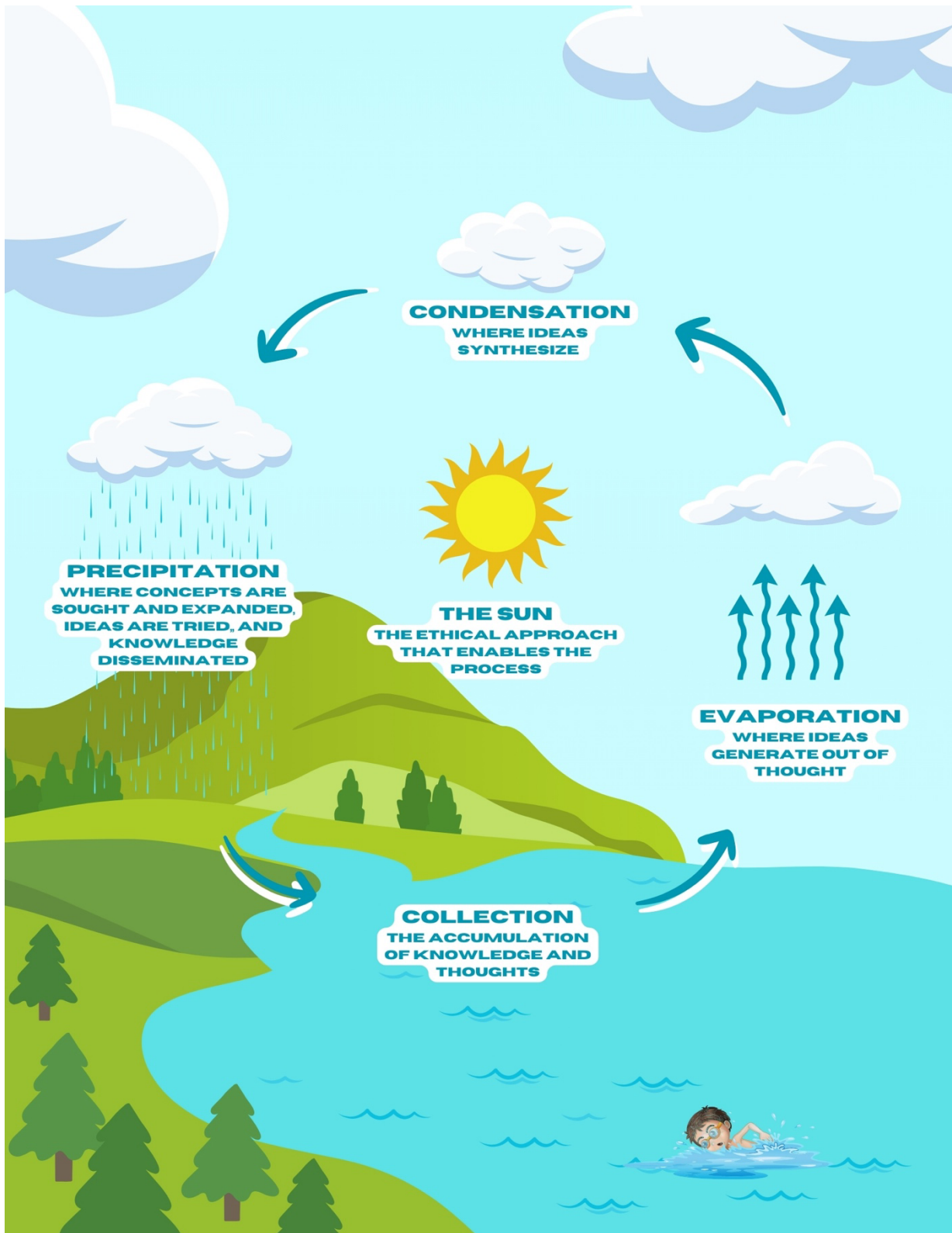


Figure 4: Visual representation of my conceptual model. Source: author.

I begin articulating my water cycle conceptual framework in the lakes, rivers, and oceans—the collection phase. The collected water symbolizes the breadth of my knowledge, ideas, and worldviews. Sometimes these worldviews are transparent, like a calm and glassy lake; at other times they are turbulent and opaque, like clashing ideas and perspectives. In the evaporation phase, my thoughts isolate out of the collected water and become distinct and available for interrogation and nuance. Through experiential methods, including reading, listening, being, and acting, I can interrogate these thoughts and begin to understand my taken-for-granted truths and cultivate a critical consciousness (Absolon, 2022; Pernecky, 2016). In this phase I can delimit my realm of possibilities towards the unheard, unseen, and unspoken that gives meaning to what and how I think (Waite, 2005). Condensation occurs when my isolated thoughts begin to form recognizable patterns. In this phase, I pause to make sense of what I know, what I don't know, and what I want to know. The next phase, precipitation, represents the moment when my thoughts mobilize beyond the internal. Like the rain that carries water, my ideas carry thoughts, meanings, and my positionality, history, privilege, and social location. I watch as my ideas are openly expressed, felt, and released into the world. I watch as they are either accepted and engaged with (like the rain that flows to the topsoil to sprout life) or abandoned (like the rain that flows back into the collected rivers and lake to repeat the cycle).

Eventually, all water, as with my ideas, flow back into the collection. The thoughts and ideas that newly emerge in the collection are intertwined with new ideas and meanings, influenced by my evolving perspectives and ideas of truth. As these ideas re-enter my collection, they engage with other thoughts and ideas I hold and carry with me, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes refusing them. This slow, recursive process highlights that coming to know is not an immediate or linear achievement, it is a slow process that occurs over time and is rendered visible through the

changes that accumulate in my collection of thoughts. Moreover, the process further suggests that knowledge is never detached from the knower—it is shaped by the context from which it emerges and returns to me (Kitagawa, 2023).

In this model, the sun represents my ethical approach—the values that guide each step of this work. It reminds me that ethics are not conditional, they are foundational. Without the sun, the water cycle does not continue; without ethics, I cannot seek. My ethical approach forms the foundation of this work and shapes how I engage, articulate, and return this knowledge. For that reason, the sun sits at the center of my conceptual framework.

My ethical stance activates my methodology—shaping not only what I do, but how and why I choose to do it. The water cycle metaphor guides the structure and rhythm of a cyclical, relational, and recursive methodological approach. Each stage of the water cycle—evaporation, condensation, precipitation, and collection—provides a framework for how I engage with the ideas, participants, and knowledge in this work. This conceptual grounding allows me to embrace non-linear approaches by showing how ideas that emerge during data collection (precipitation) are always understood in relation to earlier phases of meaning making (condensation), and reflection (evaporation), all of which are shaped by my positionality and ethical commitments. My methods, therefore, are fluid, iterative, and responsive, chosen not just for their technical fit but how well they align with the rhythms of the research. In this way, my methodology and conceptual framework exist in mutual states of influence and being—further articulating my commitment to the “pluralistic, eclectic, and flexible” relationships that honour the cyclical and relational pursuit of knowledge (Absolon, 2022, p. 229).

In the remainder of this chapter, I outline my methodological approach to this work and expand the conceptual framework to articulate its influence on my methodological approach.

Isolated black italicized texts are excerpts from my research journal, originally recorded during field work and community visits. Isolated blue text represents my conceptual reflections, used to help guide you, the reader, through my application of the water cycle metaphor.

Collection: Paradigms, Worldviews, Methodologies, and Research

I start swimming the body of collected water. With my goggles on, I look around and can see the truths through which I have come to know the world.

Paradigms offer a framework through which to view and understand the world (Absolon, 2022). They consist of diverse and widely accepted patterns of thought that routinize how people can seek, interpret, and understand reality (Absolon, 2022). They encompass recurring ideas, theories, methods, and languages that facilitate systematic explorations of events across times, spaces, and scales (Anand et al., 2020). They give meaning to known realities (ontology), how we can know these realities (epistemology), and the approaches we use to come to know (methodology) (Hart, 2010; Pernecky, 2016). Scholars—particularly Indigenous scholars—have emphasized the importance of axiology—the values of knowledge acquisition—as an essential component of knowledge seeking (Kovach, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021a; Wilson, 2008). Axiology informs how researchers approach their work, guiding the ethical responsibilities they hold towards human and non-human participants, and framing ethics of care, respect, and reciprocity as foundational to meaningful research (Kovach, 2021).

Modern Western philosophical thought is largely rooted in Enlightenment thinking, which often promotes human rationality based on capitalist and imperial progress (L. T. Smith, 2021a). Heavily embedded in this notion is the separation of nature and culture, in which humans can

legitimately exploit and control the land and natural resources for individual profit and gain, including research (Absolon, 2022; Cronon, 1996). This philosophical underpinning is rooted in positivist thinking, whereby Truth and knowledge exist independent of the body and mind and can be uncovered through replicable measurements and tests (Absolon, 2022; Pernecky, 2016). This contrasts with Indigenous relational philosophical thought, which often define progress through the strength and success of mutually beneficial relationships (Kovach, 2021). These philosophies emphasize holistic, reciprocal connections across time, space, and land and are grounded in community and culture (Kovach, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021a; Wilson, 2008). They are not fixed or universal; they evolve over time and space and are shaped by distinct social, cultural, and biophysical environments (Wilson, 2008). As a result, different Indigenous groups hold unique philosophical truths, meanings, values, approaches, and ethical commitments (Kovach, 2021).

However, despite the depth and legitimacy of Indigenous philosophies, their integration into academic research remains lackluster (Simpson, 2017). As critical race and Indigenous methodology theorist Sweeny Windchief from the Fort Peck Tribes (Assiniboine) in Montana and colleagues (2018) explain, Indigenous research paradigms can only be accepted in the academic literature when they are presented in Western formats, enabling “those in power to assert control of others by setting the terms of the [academic] debate” (p. 539). They draw on Grande's (2004) concept of “rhetorical imperialism,” the practice by which Western institutions appear to accept Indigenous methodologies only after translating them into colonial terms, reaffirming colonial authority in the production of knowledge (Windchief et al., 2018). Hird and colleagues (2023) similarly explain that “the academy is often incompatible with local Indigenous cultures and politics” (p. 5). Despite these barriers, Indigenous scholars continue to claim space within academia, advancing community-grounded frameworks and refusing colonial academic

gatekeeping that sets narrow limits of inquiry (Absolon, 2010; Coulthard & Simpson, 2016; Kovach, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021a; Whyte, 2017, 2017). As Māori iwi Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou critical theorist Smith (2021a) reflects, “contained within this imperative is a sense of being able to determine priorities, to bring to the centre those issues of our own choosing” which has the power to lift and validate Indigenous knowledge and seekers (p. 42).

Some Indigenous scholars argue that non-Indigenous researchers, like myself, cannot truly engage with ontological and epistemological tenets of Indigenous Knowledge and should therefore exercise caution (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021a). These arguments suggest that Indigenous methodologies express a particular way of knowing and coming to know that is rooted within Indigenous cultural, knowledge, and spiritual relations (Gone, 2019). The broadly positioned argument maintains that when White scholars use Indigenous methodologies, they risk reproducing unjust, authoritative statements that reduce, misrepresent, and over-simplify complex cultures, knowledge systems, and worldviews (Gone, 2019; L. T. Smith, 2021a).

Tlingit and Haida scholar Charlies Menzies (2001), on the other hand, invites non-Indigenous researchers to engage in respectful, responsible, reciprocal, and relevant Indigenous research. The invitation, echoed by Anishinaabekwe scholar Kathy Absolon, comes with the caveat of maintaining “emancipatory, liberatory, anti-colonial and anti-racist principles” (Absolon, 2022, p. 48). These approaches are rooted in mutual, reciprocal relationships built on trust (Castleden et al., 2012). Steph Woodworth, a settler scholar, for example, offers one way to weave respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relevance through all stages of their research by demonstrating that continually foregrounding relationships with Elders, community members, youth, and the land creates safe spaces that encourage the exchange of knowledge and wellbeing (2025). Their work offers an example of the conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and

axiological possibilities that emerge “when non-Indigenous academics listen attentively to what upholds Indigenous research and scholarship” (Kovach, 2021, p. 266).

Despite this progress, the colonial roots and trauma inflicted by research practices and programs can persist through ongoing extractive methods that seek to tokenize and benefit from the knowledge shared by Indigenous Peoples and communities (L. T. Smith, 2021a). Various organizations—including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (Moore et al., 2017)—and Indigenous Nations—including Deh Cho First Nations (Gargan, 2004)—have published ethical research guidelines and protocols. These reports have offered instructive boundaries for researchers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to respectfully and integrally conduct research (Koster et al., 2012). Despite the ethical guidelines offered by the aforementioned reports, researchers agree that research protocols—including ongoing consent—must be adaptable and continually negotiated with the participating individuals and communities to ensure ethical and integral grounding (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Grimwood, 2022). Such ethical approaches can “open up possibilities for understanding and knowing [or repairing] the world and [offer] different solutions to problems caused by colonialism” (Smith, 2021a, p. xiii).

To explore the world differently, some Western scholars have increasingly adopted community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) methodologies. CBPAR methodologies were first used in the 1940s (Castleden et al., 2008); they offer unique, collaborative research approaches that are grounded in community needs, aim to build local capacity, advance social and political change (Kindon et al., 2007), and decolonize research protocols (Melro & Ballantyne, 2022). CBPAR approaches vary significantly depending on the context—including the nature of relationships among and between researchers, community members and participants, and the

communities themselves (Grimwood et al., 2012). As such, there is no set formula or concrete methodology to guide CPBAR projects.

Among CBPAR methodologies, participation is not concretely defined, it exists along a continuum, ranging from passive to deep (Grimwood, 2022). CBPAR studies that rely on more limited forms of participation may involve methods like consultations, where researchers seek approval for pre-determined research questions and approaches, potentially limiting opportunities for deep engagement and dialogue (Grimwood, 2022; Melro & Ballantyne, 2022). This approach is more often aligned with projects where community transformation or relationships are not the primary focus, or in cases where researchers face institutional or structural constraints (Jacquez et al., 2013). While not inherently problematic, if left unexamined, this process can reinstate structural oppressions that sustain imperialist, top-down research methodologies (Fine et al., 2021). Conversely, CPBAR projects that prioritize community empowerment and ongoing dialogue can help build up participant capacities and support structural change through local policy and decision making processes (MacDonald et al., 2015).

Scholars, particularly those working with historically marginalized communities, have raised concern about the conceptual tenets of CBPAR methodologies. De Leeuw et al. (2012) outline four common methodological pitfalls: (1) the theoretical and practical oversimplification of non-racist, anti-colonial approaches, (2) the mistaken assumption that partnerships inherently resolve power-laden positionalities between the researcher and researched, (3) the research power and funding often remaining in the hands of academic institutions, and (4) the imbalanced expectations among academic collaboration, deliverables, relationship building, and community-oriented outputs. Despite these challenges, scholars have persisted and found mutually beneficial ways to engage CBPAR methodologies in their work with Indigenous communities. In Nunavik,

for instance, CBPAR was used to create a research-informed community-based monitoring program that blends Traditional Knowledge and scientific data to help the community adapt to climate change while maintaining traditional livelihoods and practices (Tremblay et al., 2008). In Ka'a'gee Tu (Kakisa, NWT), a research-led community garden program that helps ensure food security emerged from community-based research that focused on the localized impacts of climate change (Simba & Spring, 2017). These works offer strong examples of Western methodologies being adapted to benefit Indigenous communities.

In swimming through the collected water, I see both Western and Indigenous research approaches. I rely on time and my ethical framework to help me make sense of what's below and around.

As a non-Indigenous researcher working with Tłtsh'ékédélj, my approach is shaped by philosophical reflections from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and is further guided by the Jewish concept of Tikun Olam. In the remainder of this section, I share and justify my methodological approach and adopted methods. Like the water cycle, my methodological approach draws energy from the sun—the relational ethics that guide and enable this process. It is grounded in a responsive ethic to the relationships that I carry with me through this work and a desire to do this work in a way that feels right to me. When my approach felt wrong or unjust, or I saw how I could make it better, I paused to reflect and adjust; I only moved forward when I could see a path that aligned with my ethical integrity. This was my attempt to engage Tikun Olam—repairing relations and reducing harm—throughout the research process.

Practically, in looking for a way forward, I first turned to community-focused and grounded academic approaches that I have been formally trained in through my university education: CBPAR methodologies. CBPAR methodologies offer a flexible roadmap, supported by extensive scholarship, for engaging in cross-cultural research (De Leeuw et al., 2012; Grimwood et al., 2012; Jacquez et al., 2013; Melro & Ballantyne, 2022; Tremblay et al., 2008). They offer grounded flexibility to navigate the complex, ethical, and nuanced relational research dimensions. Yet, I found that traditional CBPAR methodologies fell short in guiding me through creating and sustaining equitable research partnerships, ethically fostering social action without victimizing or uninvitedly speaking on behalf of others, and upholding broader commitments to my relational accountability. In short, traditional CBPAR methodologies did not fully align with my ethical compass or commitments, and the relationships I sought to build and sustain through this process.

She called me “yahti” [priest or missionary] again. I still can’t tell if its endearing or out of spite. I just give that weird smile where my mouth stretches flat, and I wait for someone to say something next.

Cathy asked why she calls me that... Connie said it’s not funny.

“Yahti, what are you doing? Come plant flowers with me.”

“Ok, I’d love to.”

Prior to my field experience, I held a romanticized view of CBPAR methodologies. CBPAR methodologies encourage researchers to “decolonize power relations” and dismantle the power structures at the basis of traditional colonial research relations (Vivona & Wolfgram, 2021, p. 514). Despite my best and ongoing efforts, as my journal entry above reminds me, these hierarchies are

complex and will always remain. Through my relations and this process, I aim to give space to them rather than abolish or hide them.

My presence in Tthets'éhkédélj is shaped by uneven power dynamics: I am a white settler born and raised in southern Canada conducting funded doctoral research with Tthets'éhkédélj. This imbalance is visible at every stage of the project, with every relationship I carry with me, and no label can erase it. I do not claim to have decolonized myself or the research context in the ways that CBPAR might ideally envision. Nor do I believe that such a claim is possible without ignoring the enduring social relations, power structures, and locations that continually structure life in North America. Still, I believe that through this work, self-reflection, accountability, and care, I have done meaningful work to continue to right the wrongs that I have the ability, power, and authority to, by listening, sharing space, and being. This work will continue beyond the temporal confines of this degree.

Stringer (2007) explains that the goal of action research is to “engage the complex dynamics involved in any social context” (p. 1) to “provide the means for people to engage in systemic inquiry to design a way of accomplishing a desired goal” (p. 6). My aim in this work is not to “awaken” community members to the structural conditions they navigate daily. Tthets'éhkédélj community members can already articulate these conditions better than I ever could. Because my role in this work is not to guide inquiry towards systemic change, but rather to learn from and with community members whose knowledge of their own structural conditions are deep and grounded, I refuse to label this work as action research.

In the context of community-based research, “consultation” is defined as “a one-way communication pathway” (Adams & Faulkhead, 2012) that “gives the community at least partial ownership of the research project” (Sanderson & Allard, 2003, p. 25). Living in Sòmba K'è and

the Dehcho Region, I have seen consultation take the form of unwanted posters that become litter and poorly attended community events that result in a presumed passive acceptance of research goals and priorities. I've witnessed researchers and government employees "consult" community members—both in-person and online—by hosting community feasts and then disregarding the feedback offered. As I have seen and experienced it, consultation often sustains top-down dynamics—enacted by researchers seeking approval for pre-determined plans rather than engaging in a genuinely collaborative or co-created process (Ogunrin et al., 2022).

Collaboration, by contrast, refers to open and stable relationships that promote respect, reciprocity, and intentionality (Mataira, 2019). It is rooted in relationships and ethical accountability towards one and other and is prominently featured in the CBPAR literature (Castleden et al., 2008; Kindon et al., 2007; Krieg & Roberts, 2007; Tobias et al., 2013). Scholars agree that it takes vulnerability and continuity to foster a true sense and spirit of collaboration (Sanderson & Allard, 2003; Wilson, 2008). In the case of my research, the collaborative process unfolded through embodied and practiced relationships, rather than through the formal structures of collaborative-seeking events.

Finally, the term "community" itself is ambiguous (Sousa, 2021). In this research, I use "community" to refer to the self-identified Tłı̨t̨s'ė́hkédélj Got'ie who live, work, and maintain social, cultural, and political ties in and around the settlement; it is not a single, unified body, but a constellation of kinship ties, relationships, governance structures, and diverse voices that sometimes converge and diverge to form a community. Other CBPAR researchers have documented challenges in both accessing (Brunger & Wall, 2016) and defining community (Sousa, 2021). These works explain that CBPAR methodologies use "community" as a broadly emplaced

term to encapsulate the different degrees of participation, engagement, and perspectives from community members (Sousa, 2021; Stephens et al., 2020).

My experience with “community” reflects this complexity. While this study depended on the support and guidance of key community members, it also encountered a range of contrasting perspectives on whether the research should proceed and, if so, how it ought to be structured. Many of these criticisms boil down to my positionality as a researcher, and for those reasons, certain community members opted out of participation. Because applying the blanket label “community-based” would risk erasing those divergent positions—including the voices that questioned or declined participation in the project—I do not describe this work as fully community-based. Instead, I acknowledge it as relational research conducted with specific individuals and groups with whom I had established research relationships.

This complexity is further complicated by the small size and geographic distribution of Tłtsh’ehk’édélı. Although the First Nation has 162 registered members as of 2021, the community housed 63 residents (Statistics Canada, 2021). Registered members are geographically dispersed across Canada, some of whom frequently visit from their homes to Tłtsh’ehk’édélı for family, hunting, and harvesting reasons. Although these relationships are significant, residents living outside of the community were not invited to participate in this research. Throughout the project, I attempted to maintain contact with some folks who live outside the community with the intention of later inviting them to participate, but logistical and timing constraints of developing and sustaining those relationships made it too difficult for me to remain accountable to them. For that reason, this study only includes the voices and perspectives of those who lived in Tłtsh’ehk’édélı during the time I conducted field work. Consequently, I further hesitate to situate this work among the entire community, and instead, I emphasize the relations I carry through this work.

Despite my uneasiness with aspects of CBPAR approaches, I continue to look for a meaningful-to-me path forward. I am reminded by University of Minnesota scholar Bruce Braun (2002) that present-day social and cultural conditions can be challenged from within the colonial mindset itself. He argues that settler scholars, and the public more broadly, maintain a reflexive responsibility to re-enact their practices to challenges the injustices sustained by present-day colonial thought and rule. In this research, I embrace a form of methodological promiscuity, drawing on tenets of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous methodologies to effectively, and ethically, attend to my research relations and objectives (Childers, 2014). To guide me through my approach, I draw closely on key tenets of relational accountability, an Indigenous methodology described by Wilson (2008). In the next section, I outline the philosophical foundations of relational accountability and how I draw influence from them. In doing so, I further chart my ethical compass and how it enacts this research.

Relational Accountability

Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) introduces “relational accountability,” an Indigenous Research Paradigm (IRP), that binds ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological values through a web of human-human, human-non-human, non-human-non-human, ancestral, and spiritual relations across time and space (Wilson, 2008). In this view, knowledge is contingent on how entities relate to one and another and are embedded in the reciprocal relationships that carry responsibility (Ljubicic et al., 2022; Wilson, 2008). This approach can lead to a “non-dominating” and “non-exploitative” pursuit of knowledge (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016, p. 60). Relational knowledge is never static; it evolves alongside relationships (Starblanket & Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2019; Wilson, 2008). It challenges the notion of an

objective truth and instead recognizes that multiple realities, each grounded in their own distinct relational networks, can and do exist (Wilson, 2008). Knowledge, then, cannot be discovered. Rather, it is co-created, transformed, and renewed through relationships to time, space, and land.

Within relational knowledge, the land is offered agency and conceptualized as a living, sentient relation (Atleo & Boron, 2022; Wildcat et al., 2014). Knowledge is co-created through ongoing relationships between humans and non-humans, including the land, whereby all parties are mutually influential. As Coulthard (2010) notes:

[Indigenous] humans held certain obligations to the land, animals, plants, and lakes in much the same way that we hold obligations to other people. And if these obligations were met, then the land, animals, plants and lakes would reciprocate and meet their obligations to humans, thus ensuring the survival and well-being of all over time. (p. 80)

Land-based knowledge shapes symbiotic relationships that foster collective wellbeing across past, present, and future relationships (Absolon, 2010; Kealiikanakaoleohaililani & Giardina, 2016; Rameka, 2016; Wildcat & Voth, 2023).

As a non-Indigenous researcher, I approach relational knowledge with careful and cautious optimism. I do not claim to hold or present the ancestral knowledge shared by community members and the land. Yet, my cultural, academic, and personal backgrounds do not negate the value and knowledge that I bring to this work. I, too, am one part of the broader relational web and carry knowledge and responsibilities to my relations. In the next section, I provide an overview of the methods that guided my efforts to honour my relations throughout the research process. To articulate my approach, I draw on CBPAR and relational methodologies.

Evaporation: Approaching Research

Here, my thoughts start to come together. It is the early stages of something taking shape. I see my thoughts a little more clearly and how they fit together, or don't, and what remains.

As a non-Indigenous doctoral student working with an Indigenous community, I often felt out of place and struggled with self-doubt. I found solace in academic writing that welcomes non-Indigenous researchers into Indigenous research and offered support and guidelines along the way (see Menzies, 2001; Wilson, 2008). To chart my own path forward, I leaned on the works and observed practices that resonate with me.

First, I drew on Charles Menzies' (2001) four-step process for ethical engagement with Indigenous communities. This work outlines an easy-to-follow, flexible four-step plan that I could use. The steps encourage researchers to (1) initiate dialogue with community members to decide whether a research relationship is mutually beneficial; (2) co-design the research framework, co-refining questions, methods, and outcomes; (3) carry out the research in ways that honour the agreed upon framework; and (4) write, revise, and share findings with the community in accessible and meaningful formats. Menzies (2001) stresses that these are guidelines, not a rigid template, and researchers should adapt their processes to suit each relationship in the project. This flexibility aligns with the idea that research preparation, ethical nuances, knowledge collection, meaning making, and reciprocation are fluid and dynamic processes (Kovach, 2009, 2021).

In my application of Menzies' model, I treat step 1 (initiating dialogue) and step 4 (knowledge development and sharing) as distinct steps. By contrast, I blended steps 2 and 3 into a

single, iterative phase. As I collected data, I continually refined my questions and methods in response to community feedback and my own reflections. Working in an intercultural context as a researcher for the first time, I made mistakes, reflected, learned, and adapted my process, ensuring that each research engagement was better than the last, demonstrating growth, learning, and relational accountability. The remainder of this chapter traces the evolution of my blended, iterative approach.

Kathy Absolon (2010) emphasizes that Indigenous research is fluid and dynamic, grounded in reflexivity and creativity. Drawing on my research journal, ethical grounding, and ongoing conversations with research partners, I continually reflected on my assumptions and methods—seeking ways to make the research more relevant, responsive, and just. This led to an evolving approach that relies more on the relationships that structure and give meaning to Menzies’ (2001) steps. Practically, my approach was shaped by the people and practices I learned from in the Dehcho Region, including Steph Woodworth’s emphasis on vulnerability and relational accountability; Alex Latta’s human-centered communication that links theory and practice; Geneviève Degré-Timmons’ commitment to sustained relationships; and Elders and land-users who generously share their knowledge with me as often as they could. In the remainder of this chapter, I explain my research methods.

Step 1: Initiate Ongoing Dialogue

Dialogue is essential for developing and maintaining research relationships (Kovach, 2021). While dialogue must begin at the outset, it becomes powerful when it evolves into ongoing conversations that can grow into friendships and enable deeper knowledge exchanges (S. M. Woodworth et al., 2025). Accordingly, I extend Menzies’ first step—"initiate dialogue"—into

“initiate ongoing dialogue.” Ongoing dialogue emerges from and sustains genuine relationships (and friendships) that foster mutual trust, respect, collaboration, and knowledge sharing (Ødegaard, 2016; Stronach & Adair, 2014; Tobias et al., 2013). It can help situate research within community needs, values, worldviews, and priorities while engaging participants as co-researchers (Castleden et al., 2012; Grimwood et al., 2012). Ongoing dialogue can also help to subvert traditional research power dynamics and extractive methods of data collection through the development of relationships and shared understandings (Datta, 2018). In this project, ongoing dialogue took place through regular and irregular check-ins with community members and research partners, phone calls on birthdays, Christmas cards, and support through life’s hardships. In the rest of this section, I describe the different ongoing dialogues that contributed to this research. I show how dialogue with myself, my research partners, the broader community, and the land informed my relationships and knowledge that I could later draw upon to conduct this research.

Dialogue with the Self and Positionality

This dissertation has helped me understand the different ways that I embody my identity as a cis-gender, white, Jewish beneficiary of settler colonialism. My understanding of my own position has evolved throughout this dissertation. To trace this evolution, I kept a reflexive journal to help me interrogate how my assumptions and powers shape each stage of the research (Meyer & Willis, 2019). The reflections made in my journal represent the evaporation stage in the water cycle—an ongoing experience of drawing up insights and ideas to better understand what they are and mean.

Movement through time and space has long shaped my worldview: I have enjoyed unrestricted mobility—studying, working, and travelling across continents—without questioning the privilege that enabled it. That changed after moving to Sòmba K’è in 2021. Living in the North and working with Ecology North has helped expose me to the realities and overlapping crises that shape and define life in the North (namely community, colonialism, climate change, COVID-19, housing shortages, and the rising cost of living). Here, the legacies of colonialism and residential schools are visible in ways that they aren’t to settler, middle-class, students in southern Canada.

In the past few years, I have been able to trace how my body and being continually benefits from unequal systems of education, healthcare, and policing, to name a few. I am a settler who came North to make sense of my doctoral studies and for an adventure. Recognizing that privilege carries both power and responsibility (B. Braun, 2002), I aim to act as a settler-ally—listening and learning. Yet I also remain aware that my body and presence may trigger discomfort or trauma, and I continue to imperfectly navigate these boundaries.

This project has become a form of Tikun Olam for me: an attempt to repair a small part of the world by unlearning harmful assumptions and sharing my insights with my peers and institutions. As I continue to learn, live, and be in the North, I continue to see the strength of structural injustices that often leaves behind marginalized bodies and voices and I continue to strive to right the wrongs where I can. In this light, I also recognize that Tikun Olam is ongoing work, otherwise meaning that no mending can offer a complete solution and I will always strive to better my relations.

I hope this brief account, taken into consideration with the positionality statement offered in the preface, helps you, the reader, understand the standpoint from which I conduct this work. The underlying values, motivations, and experiences I bring to this work ground my ethical

compass and keeps me accountable to my values as I work through this project. Understanding who I am, and how I approach this work, is an essential part of relational accountability. Next, I explore the relationships and ongoing dialogue that I shared with research partners.

Dialogue with Research Partners

My dialogue with Tthets'éhkédélj first began in the Ecology North office, where I attended an online presentation by the GNWT's Climate Change Unit on the 2021 flood season. Tthets'éhkédélj was among the communities discussed. Having never heard of Tthets'éhkédélj before, I took some time to Google search the community. Soon after, I cold called and emailed the community's Senior Administrative Officer (SAO) and Resource Management Coordinator (RMC) to explore a potential research collaboration on flood adaptation. A few weeks later, they responded, and we scheduled an initial meeting. In preparation for this meeting, I immersed myself in learning about the community—reading everything I could find (see Camels et al., 2015; Desmarais, 2021; Jean Marie River First Nation, 2011, 2015; Morritt-Jacobs, 2020), watching YouTube videos, and Googling the community as frequently as possible. One search led me to a research note from Wilfrid Laurier University, in which Dr. Alex Latta (a former undergraduate professor of mine) was praised for supporting the community after the flood. I reached out to him for insight and support in advance of my meeting with the SAO and RMC, and we set a time to chat.

During my conversation with Dr. Latta, I shared my research ideas, and he shared information about the project he was supporting in Tthets'éhkédélj: A Climate Change Preparedness in the North Program (CCPN) and Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program (CCHAP) funded study led by Elder Margaret Ireland called “Jean Marie River First Nation

Climate Adaptation Planning and Implementation Framework for a Resilient Dene Way of Life”. We found the synergies in our proposed research plans, and, with his recommendation to the SAO and RMC, I was able to join his research team as a graduate student from another university.

Shortly after, I visited the community for the first time through my work with Ecology North. A colleague of mine and I partnered with the local school Principal and Teacher to help revitalize the school garden. During our visit, we worked in the garden, played freeze tag with the kids, and I pushed them on the swings for hours.

hours and hours and hours

This was my first, in-person introduction to Tthets’ėhkédélj.

Two months later, Dr. Latta’s research team (consisting of Julia Gyapay, Dr. Miguel Sioui, Mackenzie Bell, and Ashley Falconer) coordinated with Elder Margaret Ireland to host focus groups and workshops on local climate challenges. I was able to attend and support the focus groups. While planning the day’s session in the band office, Elder Margaret emphasized the importance of direct, personal invitations to attract members to our workshop. Following her guidance, we split up (Julia and I went one way and Dr. Latta went the other) and we began knocking on doors to invite residents to the focus group. Julia and I knocked on Cathy’s door. “Come in,” she yelled before we could introduce ourselves. It was my first time meeting her and her brother. We were welcomed with a glass of water and a long conversation about the environmental changes she had noticed over the years. This moment, as early in the research process as it was, grounded the work in relationships of hospitality, care, and love. Before we realized, hours passed, and we missed knocking on the bulk of community doors.

That evening, we co-hosted a community feast. I naturally gravitated towards to the kids—racing around the gym playing tag. Noticing the connection, former Chief Noleen (perhaps jokingly) suggested that I should move to the community to spend more time with the kids. I took her seriously and later followed up with an expression of interest to Chief and Council (Appendix A). Four months later, with the support of Chief and Council, Elder Margaret Ireland, Dr. Latta, and Ecology North, I moved to Tthets'éhkédélj for six months.

Initial Community Dialogue

When I first arrived at the community (January 2023), I struggled. My dissertation proposal had just undergone rigorous scrutiny by my committee (for good reason), I was unsure of my research direction, disconnected from my personal, academic, and work support systems. I felt highly anxious and depressed, isolated from the people and things I loved, and questioned my ability to contribute meaningfully. These feelings led to a quiet and uncertain start to my fieldwork.

With help from my therapist, I began establishing a more sustainable routine—one that supported my wellbeing while fulfilling the commitments I made to myself, the community, and the project. Most of my mornings began with coffee visits to Elders and community members. Midday, I worked remotely for Ecology North, developing climate change education materials for youth across the North. At 2:00pm, no matter what I was doing, I would head to Louie Norwegian School (LNS) to support the students—tutoring, playing, drawing, or chasing them in freeze tag. After school, I often spent time with Marcus (pseudonym), a grade 9 student, playing chess or walking around the community before heading home to cook, call my friends and family, and journal. Spending time with LNS became central to my experience in Tthets'éhkédélj. These moments helped me form friendships and bonds with the teachers, kids, and trust with their

families. These relationships gave me insight into life in the community and offered me support and love during a personally difficult time.

By the middle of March, I felt grounded and stable enough to begin forming relationships with folks in the community. I made a point of being present—regularly walking around the community, attending community events, joining volleyball and bingo nights, waving hello to people, and helping to shovel snow off porches. Slowly, I began asking community members if they'd be interested in hosting a visitor. Marilyn was the first to say yes.

Marilyn and I spent hours talking. She told stories of her childhood, her mother's crafting skills, her experiences going on the land as a child, and the losses she experienced during the flood—her home, photos, sewing machines, and keepsakes. I also spent time with Richard and Howard, watching movies and talking about their children, their love of hunting, and the meat and memories lost in the flooding. Over tea, Connie and Jonas shared memories of traplines, residential schools, boating, tips for life on the land, and the puzzles, furniture, and photos they lost in the flood. At this point, I felt like I was making friends, building relationships, and finding my place in the community and this research.

Elder Billy and Elder Cathy

The relationships I built with Elder Billy and Elder Cathy are essential to this research. Their friendships provided safe and generous spaces to explore, unravel, and deepen my understandings of the broad impacts of colonization. For that reason, I offer a section to briefly outline Elder Billy's and Cathy's contribution to this research, and my life more broadly. Moreover, I offer this section as evidence of relational research ethics that exist beyond the temporal scale of a doctoral project.

Coffees with Elder Billy

One afternoon, early into the research process, Elder Margaret, introduced me to her older brother, Elder Billy—the son of the last hereditary chief, Chief Louie Norwegian. Elder Billy consistently welcomed me into his home for coffee, generously sharing stories of his life. When the snow melted and the river thawed, we moved our coffees outside to watch the river run toward the Arctic Ocean, observing swallows, geese, muskrats, and beavers. We also shared many dinners and time out on the land.

Elder Billy spoke at length about the social, political, cultural, and environmental changes he witnessed over his life. He regularly told stories from the trapline—travelling with dog teams and skidoos past wolf packs and across thinning ice. He taught me how to track rabbits and set snares, so I'd never go hungry in the bush. He took me boating to show where freshwater flows into the creek. We visited his camp, harvested beavers, prepared a pelt, and carved canoe paddles from a red spruce behind his camp (Figure 5). He also told me about his stories from working at the sawmill, on the tugboat, and constructing the all-season access road.

My friendship with Elder Billy is foundational—not only for this research, but for my growth as a settler Canadian ally and friend. He openly and generously shared his life, knowledge, and time with me, offering me one of the first windows into what life is like in Tthets'éhkédélj. His stories directly inform the development of the research question and objectives—further placing our relationship and his knowledge at the heart of this work. Mahsi Elder Billy.



Figure 5: Paddle Making with Elder Billy, by Sophie Rivers

Cathy's Kiddo

“How cool is this? I don’t always understand what you say and do, and you don’t always understand what I say and do. But, we’re here to learn together and from each other, and as long as we know we’re learning together we won’t need to worry about offending one another.”

With this powerful and simple framing, Elder Cathy grounded our relationship in mutual curiosity and care. She created a space where I could openly reflect on my feelings of life as a struggling doctoral student living in Tthets’éhkédélj, learning about Dene life, lived realities, and my hopes for Indigenous allyship and the kind of person I want to be. These conversations helped shape the direction of my thinking, and by extension, my being.

Building a relationship with Elder Cathy has been one of the more meaningful experiences in my recent life. She gave me the time and space to be myself when the complexity of this work overwhelmed me, and often reminded me of the power and beauty of intercultural friendships like the one we shared. She also reminded me that mistakes are a part of learning and that continuing to show up with humility and openness is the most important thing.

Our friendship continues beyond this project's timeline. We regularly share space with each other to share life's joys and challenges. For her care, wisdom, and trust, I remain grateful. Mahsi Elder Cathy.

Dialogue with the Land

In addition to engaging in ongoing dialogue with the community, I also initiated dialogue with the land. For many Indigenous peoples and communities, the land holds ancestral memories and traditional stories—it is the foundation from which governance, ethics, philosophies, culture, and relationships emerge (Datta, 2018; Wildcat et al., 2014). Building a relationship with the land helps ground research in local knowledge and worldviews, ensuring the work remains relevant and responsive to the community context (Shay et al., 2022).

As an outsider, I arrived without relationship to the land—to both its physical geographies and non-physical significance. In taking pictures and sharing them with close friends and family, I acknowledge that I romanticized the land and sustained discourses of a pristine, empty wilderness-scape (B. Braun, 2002; Pludwinski & Grimwood, 2021).

The human relationships I formed in Tthets'ėhkédélj were essential in helping me engage a two-way relationship with the land. I am grateful to those who introduced me to Tthets'ėh Ké (McGill Lake) to shovel snow off a cabin roof, to mīh enjaets'ehgo (where the fish nets are pushed

away from the shore) to fish and trap, and traditional trails where we observed how changing snow loads (re)shape the land and travel. These experiences helped me further shed my settler assumptions of the land as empty or untouched, revealing its layered social, cultural, political, and economic histories (Baldwin et al., 2011; B. Braun, 2002; Castree, 2013; Cronon, 1996; Pludwinski & Grimwood, 2021).

The children in the community also showed me the land through their eyes. After school, we would walk by the river and the creek, strengthening our relationships with the land and one another. We explored the forests and the willows where the gah (hare) ran free, searched for animal tracks in the mud, and occasionally hunted spruce grouse.

My dialogue with the land was made possible through my relationships—with youth (Figure 6), community members, and Elders—each of whom engage in the land differently. Despite these differences, they are all rooted in a common understanding: the land is everything. This relationship is woven into how I conducted this research and wrote this dissertation.



Figure 6: With the kids, out on the land, talking to the land

My thoughts are undergoing condensation. I can see the path I need to take.

I felt uneasy. Something isn't aligning.

My initial research questions focused on flooding adaptation. Community members were open and generous in informally sharing their evacuation experiences and losses. In these conversations, I reflected on two key things: (1) I wasn't emotionally prepared or able to receive these stories with the care that they deserved to be met with; and (2) I didn't have the culturally appropriate resources lined up to support those who shared hardships with me. Despite offering gratitude and empathy, I felt that listening alone wasn't enough and felt ethically wrong in asking for and receiving these stories. I knew I couldn't continue this pursuit of knowledge.

By the end of March 2023, three months into my fieldwork, I had returned to the drawing board. I reflected on what people were already telling me: movement on and across the land, either as a way of life or a prolonged excursion, was guided by knowledge passed through generations and challenged by forces beyond the community's control. Time on the land is a defining aspect of life in Tłtsh'ékédélj, as are the intersecting pressures of climate change, capitalism, and colonialism. Nearly every story community members shared with me reflected the growing social, economic, environmental, and temporal challenges that deeply shaped people's experiences of movement and stasis out on the land. This led me to an early version of my dissertation topic: exploring the historic and ongoing roles of im/mobility in Tłtsh'ékédélj. Having spent time in both personal and academic contexts thinking about the politics of im/mobility (see Bro et al., 2024; Pludwinski & Grimwood, 2021), I felt both prepared and compelled to pursue this topic. As

such, im/mobility felt like a responsible, meaningful, and intellectually engaging direction for this dissertation.

When I floated the idea past community members and my research partners, the responses were positive. I brought the idea back to my dissertation committee and it was agreed that this would be a relevant topic worth pursuing.

Steps 2 and 3: Refine the Research Process and Conduct Research

Living in Tthets'éhkédélj was a vital part of refining and conducting this research. Immersion in the community allowed me to navigate the varied complexities of intercultural research, distinguishing between idealistic intentions and practical realities. It deepened my understanding of human-land relationships and grounded me in the socio-political contexts that shape everyday life in Tthets'éhkédélj.

Precipitation: Ethics and Methods, An Iterative Process

When my ideas fall from the sky, they meet new places, people, and environments. Along their descent, they are shaped by what they encounter—just as they shape what lies beneath.

Research Journal

In the field, I maintained a detailed research journal that served as a space to respond to reflective prompts and record field observations, conversations, and experiences (Appendix B). It provided me a safe space to reflect on the teachings, ideas, and ideologies participants shared with

me, ultimately fostering a deeper relational understanding and accountability. Alongside the interview transcripts, entries from my research journal were used in the dataset.

Interviews

Following ethics approval from community members, Wilfrid Laurier University's and the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board (REB) (Appendix C), and a license approval from Aurora Research Institute (ARI), I formally began data collection. The following section outlines my ethical commitments that influenced how I collected data.

Despite recent ethical improvements to the institutional protocols that involve Indigenous participants, REB processes often fall short in fully ensuring informed and relationally accountable consent throughout research processes (Grimwood et al., 2012). In my experience, the REB process offered a helpful starting point—it prompted me to think through participant safety, research goals, and power dynamics—but I felt it didn't go far enough. I came to understand that ethical research relationships cannot be confirmed or secured through the signing of a form, especially in contexts marked by linguistic and cultural differences (Manzo & Brightbill, 2007). I sat uneasily with this, initially unsure how to respond.

The realization of what to do came after my first interview with Richard. Our shared meals and time out on the land (Figure 7) in March and April offered a strong relationship and a safe enough space for me to feel confident enough to conduct my first doctoral interview. We signed the forms, and the interview began:

Woah—I was not ready for the interview with Richard. I had my question guides, recorder, tobacco, and challah ready to offer, but I wasn't prepared for the depth of the conversation. When

I asked Richard about going on the land, he spoke of his residential school experiences, the impacts of wildfires, his love for his children, and lessons from his late father. Both of us cried. I felt guilty for the emotional burden we willingly fell into in that moment and for not completely realizing that I was asking about the deep connections between land, people, culture, residential schools.



Figure 7: The Birch Harvest with Richard, by Sophie Rivers

During the interview, Richard seemed to have been emotionally caught off guard by where his answers took him. I asked questions without fully considering the emotional or relational trauma that his responses might surface—a concern raised by other researchers working in cross-cultural contexts (Brunger & Wall, 2016). While I don't believe Richard felt harmed or unsafe in that

moment, I am grateful for his openness and patience as I learned to navigate the responsibilities of my new role as a doctoral researcher.

Later, when Richard said he was proud of his interview and happy to have had the opportunity to share his story, I began to understand interviews (and academic research more broadly) as powerful storytelling spaces. They allow people to share their lived experiences with new audiences, and, in doing so, can be deeply humbling for the storyteller and listener (Cruikshank, 2000). This experience taught me that my interview process needed more critical reflection.

At the heart of my discomfort, I realized that I hadn't shared the interview questions with Richard. This left him blind to the direction of our conversation and the questions I would ask. In response, I developed an iterative ethical process, one that I employed in subsequent interviews.

To recruit participants, I put up a poster in the band office and distributed research pamphlets to Tłtsh's éhkédélı residents. I approached as many people in the community as I could, while still being respectful of the boundaries others had put in place and those who simply weren't interested in talking to me. When participants showed interest, I began the research invitation process.

First, I offered each potential participant a "research package", consisting of the approved REB form, a plain-language dissertation proposal, and a personalized copy of the semi-structured interview guide (discussed in the next section). I also offered potential participants a verbal summary of each document, and time and space to review the materials on their own—without the pressure of my presence. To articulate the research goals, objectives, and methods, I relied on what Grimwood et al. (2012) call "engaged acclimatization," consisting of "responsible human interaction and interpersonal experience" (p. 216). I built relationships with the participants first

and then developed an ethical approach that resonated with our shared values and worldviews. Across the board, participants responded positively, expressing appreciation for the transparency and accountability built into this ethical approach. A few days later, I would reengage the participants and gauge their interest in participation and we would set an interview time and location.

Interviews

Interviews are traditionally extractive methods of data collection that rely on the researcher's questions and the participant's responses—inherently reflecting transactional power imbalances (Kovach, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021a). Keeping this in mind, I began each interview began with an informal check-in, allowing participants to share how they were feeling and to voice any needs before we started. This opening ranged anywhere from 5 to 60 minutes. On two occasions, participants disclosed hardships unrelated to the research, making it unethical and inappropriate to proceed; instead, we simply spent time together as friends. Similarly, some interviews were rescheduled to respect participants' commitments to beaver trapping (Figure 8) or fishing.

For interviews that proceeded, we began by reviewing the research package documents together. I reiterated my axiological approach and invited questions or concerns to emphasize relational accountability. We then reviewed the unique draft interview guide (Appendix D). By the scheduled interview times, most participants had already engaged with the question guide, noting their ideas, and marking questions to skip (Appendix E). One participant added new questions to the guide to enrich the discussion. In these moments, I accepted the revisions participants had made, without any question. This process fostered comfort and reframed participants as co-

researchers and knowledge holders, rather than passive research subjects (Scrine et al., 2020), levelling power dynamics and disrupting distrustful one-way research relationships (Grimwood et al., 2012; Scrine et al., 2020; L. T. Smith, 2021a). We then reviewed the REB forms, many of which were already completed. I ensured the REB forms had the proper signatures in the right spots, and that the audio-recorder was ready (when applicable), and the interviews began.



Figure 8: Skinning a beaver, not interviewing

The interviews used a semi-structured conversational method, guided by attentive listening and sharing (Kovach, 2010; Roulston, 2010). While I aimed for free-flowing dialogue, I often steered conversations to the interview guide's themes to ensure a balanced dataset.

Interviews followed a consistent narrative arc. I began by asking participants about their connection to the land—how they spatially and imaginatively locate it, how often they visit the land, and the barriers they face in accessing it. This helped me understand how participants define where, when, and why movement happens.

Subsequent questions drew on the relational knowledge participants had previously shared with me. I relied on my journal to help me recall the teachings, experiences, and ideas community members shared with me throughout my fieldwork to inform meaningful, relational interviews. For example, Jonas once brought me out on the river to observe eroding riverbanks. Drawing from that experience, I asked him about navigating the river, his observations of fluctuating water levels, and the changes he has noticed in the region. In this way, the research journal became a tool for building meaningful, context-specific, and relationally grounded interview questions—enabling a deeper and more fluid knowledge exchange (Wilson, 2008). This practice helped root each interview in the ongoing relationships I shared with the participants.

In my reflections from Richard’s interview, I realized I could have been framing the questions in a more culturally relevant way to respond to the research objectives and goals more accurately. At the end of each interview, minus Richard’s, I read the research objectives aloud and invited the participants to directly respond. These open-ended reflections sometimes sparked insightful discussions about land access, systemic barriers, and movement as a form of resistance to colonization.

The dataset includes 17 interviews with 23 participants (some interviews were conducted in pairs or groups), totalling over 25 hours of interview audio (Table 1). I transcribed all interviews verbatim and returned transcripts to participants for review prior to analysis. Allowing participants

to request edits or omissions helps to ensure respectful representation and more balanced power dynamics in the research process (Paylor & McKevitt, 2019).

Each participant was compensated at a rate of \$50 for every 30 minutes of interviewing, up to \$200 maximum. This is consistent with the community standard funded by the CCPN and CCHAP grant held by Elder Margaret Ireland.

Table 1. Overview of Interviews: Participants, Contexts, and Times.

Name	Community Status	Interview Location	Date	Interview Length (in minutes)
Richard	Land User	Driving to Harvest Wood	21-Apr-23	113
Victoria	Community Wellness Coordinator	Home	08-May-23	53
Marilyn	Elder	Front Porch, by the Airport	10-May-23	145
Connie	Community Member	Home	16-May-23	81
Howard	Land User	Smokehouse	16-May-23	49
Joanne and Travis	Elder and Community Member	Home	19-May-23	71
Angus, Rufus, and Cathy	Elders and Land Users	Home	19-May-23	119
Community member	Elder	Home	19-May-23	49
Donna and 2 community members	Community Members and Youth	Home	31-May-23	108
Community member	Teacher	Louie Norwegian School	02-Jun-23	20
Stan	Elder, Former Chief	Home	06-Jun-23	107
Medina	Community Member	Band Office	08-Jun-23	44
Community member	Community Member	Band Office	08-Jun-23	114
Jonas	Land User	Home and Boat	09-Jun-23	94
Arial and Anthony	Land Users & Youth	On The Land	10-Jun-23	71
Community member	Land User and Youth	Wellness Camp	20-Mar-24	138
Margaret	Elder	Home in Yellowknife	04-Apr-24	127

When Research Happens

Throughout this research, community members shared stories and lived experiences that I have intentionally chosen not to include in this dissertation. Knowledge is powerful, sacred, and inseparable from the relationships in which it is shared (Kimmerer, 2013; L. T. Smith, 2021a). In certain cases, to remove this knowledge from its relational context and insert it into this dissertation would risk me tokenizing and/or misrepresenting it (Hart, 2010; G. H. Smith, 2000). This doctoral project exists as a part of my ongoing personal journey of decolonization and growth—work that is bound to my roles as a friend, ally, and lifelong learner.

Many moments that shaped this dissertation did not emerge from formal “research engagements.” At times, the distinction between knowledge shared for research and knowledge shared through friendship was not always clear to me. When community members invited me on the land or into their homes to share meals, coffees, stories, and laughter, I embraced the space as friendship and tried to be present for my relations. In moments when I felt that the knowledge or ideas shared in moments of friendship would positively benefit the research, I tried to honour them by revisiting them during the formal interview process. Returning to these moments in a transparent way allowed me to seek explicit, informed consent to include them in the research and ensure that knowledge sharing for the purposes of research occurred within a clearly defined set of practices and boundaries. This formalized process allowed participants to expand on, reframe, or withhold knowledge from the project altogether, further affirming their agency. This practice solidifies that knowledge shared outside of defined and consenting research spaces does not emerge as “data” present in this work.

Other times, I carried stories and knowledge within. Knowledge does not always need to be coded as data to meaningfully impact research. I would quietly journal, reflect on the teachings,

and use them as guidance to help me forge a path in this world and work. These teachings influenced my ethical compass, how I listened, acted, responded, and carried myself. By engaging these teachings throughout practice rather than on a dissertation page, I sought to honour their power (L. T. Smith, 2021a). This approach reflects a commitment to relational accountability, centering the wellbeing of those who entrusted me with their lived experiences (Wilson, 2008).

Step 4: Analyze, write, revise, and distribute the research

After the rain, the water slowly flows back into the collection. It enters to the rivers, lakes, and oceans, taking all that it has learned back to eventually swirl around with what is already there.

The final step in Menzies' (2001) four step research process is to analyze, write, revise, and distribute the research. In this section, I outline my approaches to analyzing, writing, revising, and distributing the research to the Tłtsh'Éhkédélj Got'ie.

Analyze

To analyze the data, I primarily utilized Kovach's (2021) six-step process for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can assist researchers in identifying common, recurring, and alternative themes, patterns, and ideas within a data set (Efimoff, 2022; Lee et al., 2018). Kovach (2021) outlines a six-step process for thematic analysis that includes: (1) drawing on key tenets of Indigenous theoretical frameworks, (2) coding the data, (3) examining the relationships between the codes, (4) recentering Indigenous theoretical frameworks, (5) identifying overarching themes to organize the codes, and (6) recognizing and contextualizing the statements and ideas that deviate

from the identified themes. This six-step process (Figure 9) is cyclical and therefore represents a fluid and dynamic process in which each step influences and is influenced by the others (Byrne, 2022; Kovach, 2021).

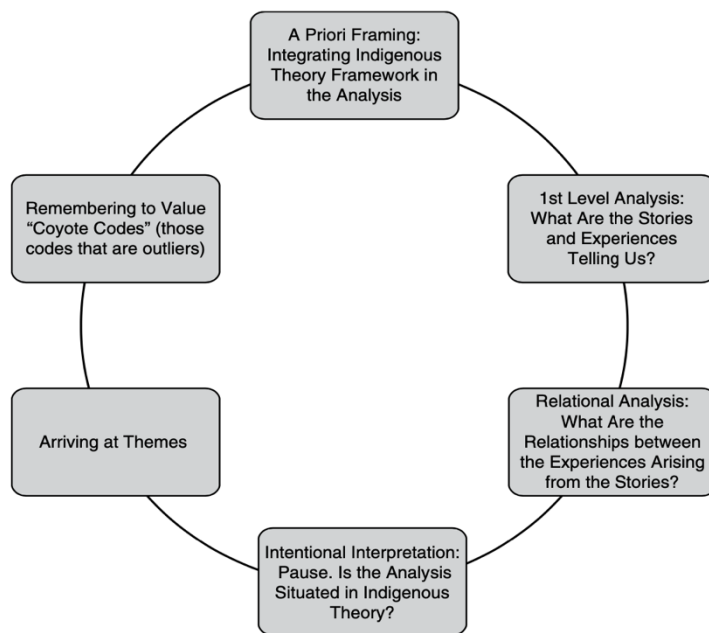


Figure 9: Thematic Analysis Approach for Indigenous Methodologies (Kovach, 2021)

This approach to thematic analysis underscores the important of researcher reflexivity as it provides ample opportunity for experiential and interpretive insights to influence the analysis (Kovach, 2021; Meyer & Willis, 2019). I relied on my research journal to interrogate how I drew connections between concepts and ideas in the dataset.

A Priori Framing

I entered Kovach's cyclical process of analysis by reviewing the key foundations of my applied theoretical perspective: relationality. I reflected in my research journal on the relationships maintained between myself, the participants, community, research partners, and land to better

understand the theoretical framework through which I make sense of the data (Kovach, 2021; Orange, 2016; Wilson, 2008).

The land and its histories (depending on the teller) convey meanings of tethered knowledge, culture, and laws. Something like all the sides of the same coin...

Intentionally foregrounding the land shapes the relational thread that weaves through the analysis. As such, I acknowledge that this work inherently takes place in relation to the people, place, time, and land-based relations that inform it.

1st Level Analysis

The first level of analysis involves identifying what is present and absent from the data (Kovach, 2021). I began by reading and re-reading the complete dataset, which included the interview transcripts and my field journal. After three read throughs, I engaged in open coding, using Microsoft Excel, broadly assigning words or short phrases to statements, ideas, and concepts (G. Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Van den Hoonaard & Van den Scott, 2012). This is a highly subjective process that involves the researcher interpreting meanings and ideas within a dataset (Van den Hoonaard & Van den Scott, 2012). I relied on my reflective journal and corresponding prompts to help me identify and make sense of the open codes that I was assigning to the data.

I open coded the data three times, reflecting in my journal before and after each round. After each read through, new codes emerged. Through this process, I identified 13 codes: subsistence, culture, wellness, connection to the land, Dene values, capitalism/colonialism,

traditional knowledge, land-based changes, land-based products, settler/school education, berries, historic, and other.

Relational Analysis

The second phase of coding involved a process known as axial coding, which entails examining the relationships between codes and grouping them into categories (Kovach, 2021). The goal of axial coding is to identify key concepts and contexts that emerge across the codes to explain how particular phenomena (in this case im/mobility) manifest (Grossoehme, 2014; J. Kendall, 1999). Among the 13 codes, many of them could be grouped into one or more of the identified axial codes: subsistence autonomy, connecting with the land, traditional knowledge, wellness, climatic and environmental changes, and the cost of living.

Two common critiques of axial coding are that it over-simplifies the nuances of a dataset by forcing statements and ideas into overarching categories, and that the subjective researcher can influence data interpretation through the creation of irrelevant axial codes (J. Kendall, 1999). To overcome each of these critiques, I adopted several strategies. First, I engaged in an iterative coding process, repeatedly reading and re-reading the dataset. This process helped ensure that the axial codes I identified were grounded in my knowledge of the dataset. Next, I compared the codes against what I knew of the community. I re-read my field notes to ensure that the axial codes also fit what I had both observed and experienced during my fieldwork. This helped to ensure that the codes were relevant. Finally, consistent critical journaling helped me identify and understand my subjective influence in this research and ensured that any unjust or unfair assumptions remained as far away from the analysis as possible.

Intentional Interpretation

The goal of intentional interpretation is to ensure that the codes and approaches are rooted in Indigenous theoretical frameworks. To do this, Kovach (2021) recommends returning to the community and resituating the work in lived relationships and experiences. In March 2024, I was invited to attend a wellness camp co-hosted by the community and the climate change adaptation research team. At the camp, I presented a detailed dissertation plan, including an overview of each chapter, to community members. In this presentation, I reviewed the axial codes that I had identified in the data. The participants in the room, including my research partners and community leadership, approved the codes and dissertation plan, an essential step in ensuring the community plays an active role in knowledge production (Kovach, 2021). I received praise from some of the community members for articulating the main themes and topics of each chapter before writing them (while others teased me, saying that it was about time I started writing my dissertation). Presenting my dissertation plan and the codes back to the community offered me a chance to explicitly seek approval for the themes and codes discussed in this dissertation.

I was later invited to return to Tłtsh's éhkédélj in September 2024 with my colleagues at Ecology North to facilitate a series of workshops on local food harvesting with the youth and community members (Figure 10).

The plan was to harvest fireweed with Margaret, Cathy, and LNS, but the drought and the fire at Elder Billy's house put that plan to rest. The goal was to merge food preservation workshops with on the land skills that could be taught to the youth. There's concern that the drought has dried up the cranberry harvest. We got to the community, played on the swings and this time I got [one of the kids] to push me hahahaha. Jonas came by and told us where we could find some low bush

cranberries. [One of the youth], under the guidance of the land-user, led the group of adults and other youth to the patch. We offered tobacco to the land and picked the berries, well I didn't and neither did [one of the kids]. Instead, we played a game of tag that ended with us touching the lichen on the trees and looking for bugs under the rocks by the river. We brought the berries back to the band office and led a community event making jam. We laughed, spoke about changes to the land over the years, our garden harvests, and winter goals.



Figure 10: Harvesting cranberries with youth

The next day, we heard rumours going around the community of a moose harvest. It's been almost a whole season without anyone getting a moose, the wildfires drove them all far away from the community. With great excitement, we went over the cookhouse and saw what I can only describe as a moose processing plant. I sat in-between Stan, who was busy at work cutting the meat off the bones, and the upside-down head, tongue sticking out. [One of the kids] sat on my lap and we touched the moose's face. At first, we cautiously poked it and then later found the courage to explore its molars, maxillipeds, skin colour, and fur. I sat there for hours, listening to Stan tell stories of traditional hunting trails, learning about moose anatomy, and slowly eating pieces of the freshest cooked meat I've ever had. I watched as several youth in the community came into the smokehouse to learn to butcher the moose, I saw the hide gifted to a youth to learn to tan and process. I watched countless packages of ready-to-cook meat go into freezers around the community. I saw so many smiles, so much pride, lots of congratulations to [the hunter], and lots of questions about when he called the moose and where he found it. [The hunter] gifted me more backstrap than I know what to do with, literally, as a vegetarian, I don't know what to do with any of it, but he invited me over to learn to how to cook it – said it was a small compensation for supporting him with his garden.

The codes identified earlier (subsistence, culture, wellness, connection to the land, Dene values, capitalism/colonialism, traditional knowledge, land-based changes, land-based products, settler/school education, berries, historic, and other) are evident in these two journal reflections. They appear in moments of harvesting and knowledge sharing around berries; community members coming together to celebrate, work, learn, and harvest a moose; the offering of tobacco on the land; and the stories shared by Stan. The codes illustrate how relational ethics, reciprocity,

land-based knowledge, and lived experiences are deeply tied to everyday life in Tthets'ėhkédélj. I left these community visits feeling confident that the axial codes were not only relevant but also meaningfully reflected in the daily realities of Tthets'ėhkédélj.

Arriving at Themes

To avoid common shortcomings in thematic analysis—identifying themes that neither fit the data nor context (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2023; Kovach, 2021)—I grounded my analysis in the relationships sustained throughout this work. This involved exploring axial codes through their contextual and relational backgrounds to ensure that it aligned with the lived experiences of community members (Wilson, 2008). Practically, this meant that I drew from my research journal and embodied relationships to evaluate the codes against what I had come to understand as community values and priorities. I then took these themes and compared them with the available literature. In doing so, I was able to situate the codes in broader land-based frameworks and embodied relationality.

Remembering to Value Coyote Themes

When grouping codes into themes, it is important to remember that not all codes will neatly align within thematic patterns (Waite, 2005). That doesn't diminish their value or contribution to the research. Outlier codes offer unique insights that challenge recurring narratives within particular perspectives (Kovach, 2021). These outlier codes and statements can reveal the often contradictory narratives that shape alternative ways of knowing the world, including perspectives and worldviews (Parkhurst, 2024). Throughout the analyzing and writing processes, I remained

committed to regularly revisiting and re-reading the coyote codes to ensure that relevant contradictory statements and discussions were thoughtfully included in this work.

Write and Revise

Writing this dissertation involved many drafts that were reviewed and edited by my research partners, Dr. Alex Latta, Julia Gyapay, and Elder Margaret Ireland, and doctoral supervisors, Dr. Sonia Wesche, Dr. Christine Gibb and Dr. Brenda Macdougall. Elder Margaret Ireland, with authority from the First Nation, granted final approval on all publications. Although Elder Margaret Ireland only reviewed the final copies of each article, I maintained regular contact with her throughout the writing process, sharing verbal updates, ideas, and the most up-to-date content of each article.

One day, over a cup of tea, Cathy and I discussed the “ownership” of knowledge concerning this dissertation. “You’ll be writing our stories, not yours,” she said. Following discussions with community research partners, we agreed that all the data collected would remain under the ownership and supervision of the First Nation. We agreed that the data should not be replicated or used in any publication without Elder Margaret’s approval and that I would be deleting the interview audio files and transcripts from my computer when they are no longer in use. We also agreed that Elder Margaret Ireland would be listed as a co-author to recognize the intellectual energy she put into the research. In addition, we agreed that Tthets’éhkédélj First Nation would be listed as a co-author on all outputs, as the community’s knowledge, stories, and contributions frame the research. While I still maintain that this work is not representative of the entire community voice, acknowledging the community as a co-author reflects the broader relational context that made this work possible. This decision also reflects the Nation’s sovereignty over their knowledge and lived experiences. It’s not perfect, but it’s a step in the right direction.

With these provisions in place, as Cathy points out, the stories articulated in this dissertation remain the property of Tłtshé'ehkédélj First Nation, while the interpretations and analyses presented here reflect my responsibility and ideas as the researcher.

Distribute

This dissertation has been shared back with both Tłtshé'ehkédélj community members and other audiences. In returning this dissertation back to Tłtshé'ehkédélj, I utilized multiple accessible formats. Indigenous paradigms and worldviews prioritize visual, oral, and experiential methods of knowledge sharing (Absolon, 2010; Hart, 2010). I relied on these methods in reciprocating the knowledge with the community.

In Tłtshé'ehkédélj, I co-hosted different community events where the purpose was to share the research back with the community, including a “Canoe Day” (Appendix F). At the Canoe Day on June 4th, 2023, I brought Elders, youth, and community members together to spend time paddling up the creek. This event allowed us to engage in im/mobility while connecting with one another, the land, Dene culture, subsistence autonomy, and Traditional Knowledge. It also allowed some of the youth to practice valuable on-the-land skills and learn where they can find fish, clams, and freshwater.

Unfortunately, the 2025 wildfire season ran late and made it unsafe and impractical for me to return to the community to distribute the research findings. Nonetheless, to distribute the research, I created research finding packages. The packages consist of copies of the prepared research articles, plain-language summaries of each article, digital audio-recordings of the key findings in the local language, Dene Zhatie, on a USB, a visual graphic that summarizes key research findings, and a uniquely commissioned painting. Because many participants do not have

access to university libraries of peer-reviewed journal subscriptions, I made efforts to ensure that the research outputs were accessible to those who contributed to them. When it is safe to visit the community, I will provide participants with copies of the prepared articles. This allows community members to read and engage with the findings in the same ways that academic audiences would, ensuring equality in access. In addition to the articles, I will offer plain language summaries of each manuscript to community members. This helps to ensure relational accountability, transparency, and accessibility throughout the research process without excluding those who contributed to it.

Many Indigenous communities have relied on oral traditions to preserve and share knowledge since time immemorable (Cruikshank, 2000), and this research is among such efforts. The journal articles and plain-language research summaries were translated and audio-recorded in Dene Zhatie by Andy Norwegian. The digital audio recordings ensure that the Elders in the community can engage in the research in their language while contributing towards broader community efforts for language and cultural preservation. With Andy's permission, these recordings are a part of the research finding packages.

As Elder Margaret often reminded me, "we are visual people." In response, I collaborated with two Northern artists who were familiar with the research process, goals, and Tthets'éhkédélj. Together, we translated the research into accessible, visual formats that reflect collective and individual contributions to the research. The first artist, Derek, a graphic designer, created a visual summary of key themes and concepts (Appendix G). The graphic was printed and will be widely distributed as part of the research findings packages. The second artist, Sophie, a painter, created individualized pieces for participants based on the relationally informed interviews and individual contributions to the research. The graphic and paintings were inspired by both artists' knowledge

of Tthets'éhkédélj and the reflections I provided them that captured key ideas, teachings, and relational moments shared between myself and the participants. Some of these paintings have been scanned and embedded throughout this dissertation.

Coinciding with delivering the research finding packages, the plan was to co-host a community feast where community members came together to celebrate the completion of a research partnership and the continuation of cross-cultural friendships. Local harvesters would supply meat and cooks would prepare the meal. At the feast, I would offer attendees' additional copies of the research findings packages to review and discuss. Finally, the feast would offer me an opportunity to thank the community members and partners that supported me in my doctoral studies and personal growth throughout the past few years. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing threat of wildfires and the toll this has had on the community, we've had to cancel the feast as well. Instead, local hunters paired up with youth in the community to provide meat boxes to community members.

Outside of Tthets'éhkédélj, chapters of this dissertation have been prepared for publication in peer-reviewed journals. The goal is to share the insights presented below with academic audiences to advance im/mobility scholarship. Throughout the bulk of my dissertation experience, I was based in the Northwest Territories, which made attending and presenting at academic conferences and poster sessions challenging due to heightened temporal, logistic, and financial costs. As a result, I prioritized sharing knowledge from this dissertation through local, community focused programs.

Collection of Water: Limitations and Concluding Thoughts

This research was shaped by and evolved through the 2023 Tthets'éhkédélj and Sòmba K'è wildfire evacuations. Writing about im/mobility while navigating my own unsettling, disorienting reality of climate-induced movement evoked deep feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and eco-anxiety. This added emotional layers and intellectual complexity to this dissertation. While this research does not focus extensively on rapid-onset climate-induced im/mobilities, it highlights related challenges and perspectives. The 2014 and 2023 wildfire evacuations and the 2021 flood have disrupted seasonal harvesting cycles and altered patterns of land use, bringing new urgencies to how people understand and experience movement through time and space. The recent climate-induced evacuations have revealed the increasing precarity in land-based lifestyles, offering uncertainty to long-held patterns of movement. This is not because the land is failing to withhold its relational accountability, rather the land's relationships are influencing it in new ways.

These events complicate how research can be conducted. What does it mean to research and write about the land and movement in contexts where people are healing from forced displacement? How do land-based relationships fluctuate with changing social and biophysical conditions? To me, these questions add nuance to the work, but also deepen the significance of im/mobility as more than a conceptual practice but a lived experience infused with social, political, economic, environmental, and practical implications.

As of September 2025, the summer's wildfire season lingers and threatens forests, homes, and critical infrastructure. Tthets'éhkédélj remains on evacuation alert (meaning residents' bags are packed for a declared evacuation at moment's notice). The intensity of a nearby fire (less than 24 kilometers away) ebbs and flows with the intensity of winds and rain. Cathy tells me she feels like she can't catch a break.

Moving Forward

This research was not undertaken in isolation. It was guided and reaffirmed by key community members, whose knowledge and care shaped both the research question and the ways it was approached. Their leadership grounded the work in relationships and kept it accountable to the place and people it is in relation with. Yet, everything in this dissertation has been filtered through my positionality as a white, settler researcher. No matter how carefully I listen, interpret, and write, I cannot, and do not, claim a completely neutral view of Indigenous im/mobility in Tłtshets'éhkédélj. Through this experience, I've taken steps to challenge the perspectives that I carry with me in research and life. It has helped me both unsettle and reconcile my own interpretations of positionality, research, and relationality. Even so, these steps do not free me of my errors, wrong doings, and experiences that coincide with the research process—I am human, and this work reflects that.

Chapter 2 References

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Figure 11 The Confluence, by Sophie Rivers

Chapter 3: Staying, moving, and knowing: Relational im/mobility in Tthets'éhkédélj First Nation

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Abstract

Indigenous communities have long histories of im/mobility—relationships between movement and stasis—which encompass physical movement alongside cultural, spiritual, and emotional ties to the land. Yet Indigenous voices, experiences, and perspectives are often overlooked in the im/mobility literature, leading to epistemic erasure of meanings that shape their worldviews and practices as well as the policy decisions aimed at supporting them. This study addresses this gap by identifying and examining the culturally relevant values that influence Indigenous im/mobility within Tthets'éhkédélj (Jean Marie River), a Dene community in the Northwest Territories, Canada. Through relationally informed semi-structured interview data and a thematic analysis, the findings reveal that connecting with the land—by walking, boating, and driving snowmobiles, quads, and trucks—enhances subsistence autonomy, while both significantly shape Traditional Knowledge. The relationships among factors underscore the necessity for a holistic policy-relevant understanding and regulation of im/mobility, better reflecting Indigenous perspectives and worldviews. By offering a relational approach, this research contributes to the literature by emphasizing the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives, fostering a more inclusive understanding of im/mobility in both theory and coinciding policy development.

Key Words: Indigenous im/mobility; Traditional Knowledge; Subsistence; Land; Tłı̨t̨ı̨'éhkédélı̨ First Nation; Dehcho

Introduction

In recent years, scholars have critically examined mobility and immobility, focusing on uneven social, cultural, political, and environmental relations that shape movement through time and space (Schewel, 2019; Sheller, 2018). These inquiries contextualize how physical mobility and immobility intersect with social structures and individual agency, yielding valuable insights on topics such as migration (Boas et al., 2022), social inequality (Sheller, 2018), and the power-laden relationships that construct and produce space (Jensen, 2011; Manderscheid, 2020). This literature has helped shape the development of policy frameworks that aim to manage population movement dynamics by focusing on the various socio-structural and individual drivers amidst rational-choice paradigms (Black et al., 2011; Carling & Schewel, 2018).

Recent scholarship on mobility and immobility has utilized the term “im/mobility” to theorize the complex, uneven, and interdependent relationships between movement and stasis (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020). The concept refers to the continual ebbs and flows between forced or voluntary and permanent or temporary movements (Boas et al., 2022) and the ongoing negotiations regarding who, when, how, and where to move (Swapan & Sadeque, 2021). Im/mobility recognizes that humans and non-humans are neither fully in motion nor stuck in place (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020; Schewel, 2019). Rather it suggests that humans exist in states of motion that are neither temporary nor definitive and are influenced by individual agencies and social and structural factors at unique and changing temporal and spatial scales (McLeman et al., 2021; Zickgraf, 2021). As this scholarship is informed by policy discourses, it tends to utilize Western logics of movement

and stasis, failing to account for alternative onto-epistemologies, particularly Indigenous⁵ ones (Ballantyne, 2018; Standfield, 2018).

Existing im/mobility conceptual models are primarily developed in migration studies and evaluate the influence of demographic, economic, social, political, and environmental drivers at various scales (Black et al., 2011; McLeman et al., 2021; Van Hear et al., 2018), and the roles of self-efficacy and risk perception in shaping migration decisions (Bro et al., 2024; Carling & Schewel, 2018). As Van Hear et al. (2018) assert, these models often take a binary approach, specifically about whether or not to migrate. Suliman et al. (2019) argues that this approach neglects the relational dynamics and fluidity that unevenly and significantly shape im/mobility (see also, Adey, 2009; Bélanger & Silvey, 2020). Furthermore, and most importantly for the analysis presented here, these frameworks are guided by Western notions of rationality and reason to conceptually determine im/mobility drivers and trajectories (Zickgraf, 2019, 2021). This leads to assumptions about spatial priorities and the values of im/mobile bodies, which often empirically overlook Indigenous and other non-Western worldviews and experiences (Toomey, 2022). As such, the policy tools that emerge from this scholarship risk reproducing colonial im/mobility logics—treating issues of movement and stasis through time and space instead of as a culturally embedded, place-based practice.

This paper aims to address this colonial bias in the im/mobility literature by developing a culturally grounded approach to articulate Indigenous im/mobility values. We propose a conceptual shift that could influence policy by emplacing more culturally situated, relational, and respectful understandings of land, movement, and place. This can serve as a useful tool to explore the epistemological and ontological nuances that shape Indigenous im/mobility practices and

⁵ “Indigenous” is used as an umbrella term to reflect and honour the shared experiences, worldviews, histories, values, traditions, and intersectional identities among diverse nations (Stewart, 2018).

meanings that can lead towards meaningful, culturally grounded policy (Schewel, 2019), for example in relation to climate change adaptation, food security, health and wellness programming, and protected areas development. We aim to conceptualize im/mobility by documenting Indigenous meanings and practices at a community level, with a specific empirical focus on Tthets'éhkédélj (commonly known as Jean Marie River⁶), a small Dene community in the Northwest Territories, Canada (Figure 11).

While we acknowledge the impacts of socio-structural factors, including colonialism (de Haas, 2021; Whyte et al., 2019), climate change (Whyte et al., 2019; Wiegel et al., 2019), age (Holecki et al., 2020), and gender (Schewel, 2019) on shaping im/mobility practices, we refocus our gaze on the historic and present-day Indigenous cultural practices and knowledge systems that exert autonomous influence on im/mobility. Decentering oppressive frameworks from the frame of analysis is not meant to diminish their importance but allows us to recenter culturally informed narratives and dynamics that are often overshadowed by scholarly attention to colonial systems. In doing so, we emphasize Indigenous traditions and practices exerted in spite of colonial power relations (Whyte, 2017) and learn to “[think outside] the colonial box” (Kovach, 2021, p. 20). By doing so, we seek to reclaim a space for recognizing and studying how Indigenous cultural, social, spatial, and knowledge traditions shape im/mobility.

We begin with a review of the research context and the relevant Indigenous im/mobility literature. The paper continues with an overview of the relational ethnographic approach used in this research. Finally, we review our main findings and explore the insights this work offers regarding im/mobility.

⁶ There are several translations available for Tthets'éhkédélj, including ‘the place downriver of the sparking rock’, ‘the place downriver of McGill Lake’, and ‘water flowing over clay’.

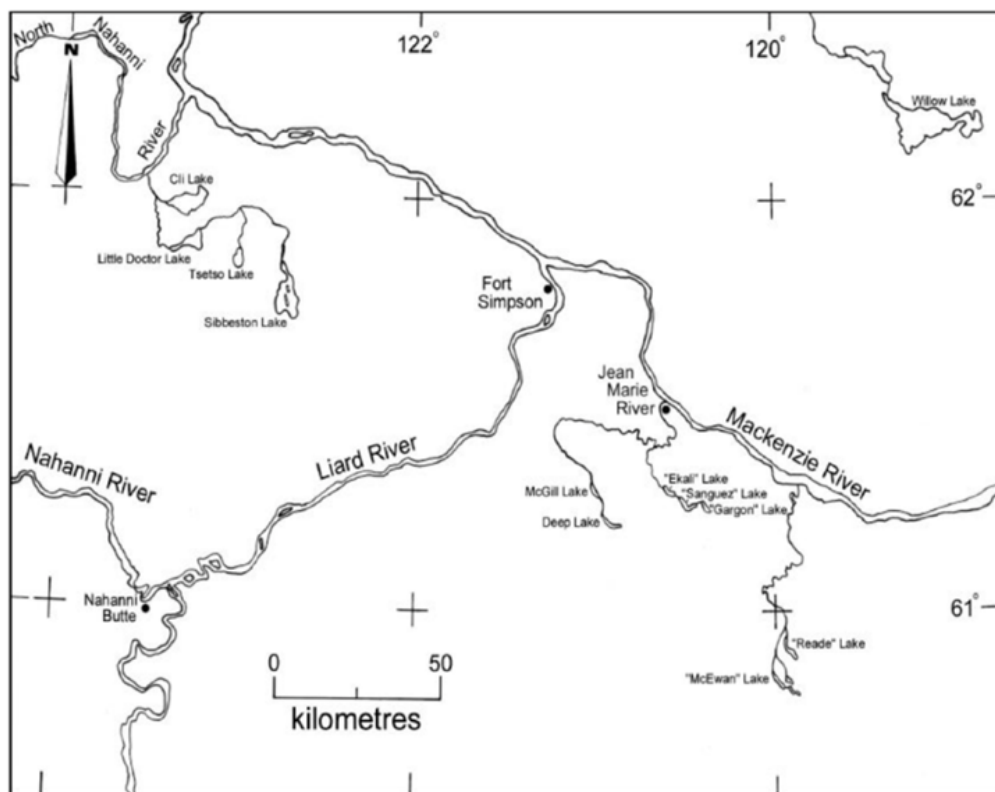


Figure 12: Map of Jean Marie River (Stewart et al., 2003).

Research Context

Ttsets'ėhkédélį is located in the boreal forest of the Mackenzie Valley, an area abundant in lakes and rivers. The community's vision statement reads:

We the Ttsets'ėhkédélį Got'ie, are proud of our Dene traditions, language, and beliefs. We value and respect the land, water, and animals that have sustained us for many generations. We shall continue to use and respect our natural resources. Building on the knowledge and skills of our people, we shall work together to create a healthy, sustainable future for ourselves and our children. We shall strive to find a balance between the traditional and modern ways of life. (Jean Marie River First Nation, n.d.)

The families that make up the community began permanently settling in its current location in the 1920s, where resources and wildlife were plentiful. Their decision to settle was influenced by the increasing settler presence in the Northwest Territories, coinciding with the discovery of oil in Norman Wells and the signing of Treaty 11 (Fumoleau, 1984). Since then, the community has been subject to the ongoing pressures of colonization, including the residential school system during much of the twentieth century, and more recently the rapid onset of climatic and environmental changes, flooding, and wildfires, that have led to two recent community evacuations (2021 and 2023).

In response to these historic and ongoing challenges, Tłı̨t̨ı̨s'ė́hkédélı̨ community members continue to demonstrate resistance and resilience. They kept their youngest youth out of the residential school system by building a local schoolhouse (Sibley, 2020) and created Western economic opportunities by pooling resources and buying a tugboat and sawmill (Helm, 1961). Yet, these opportunities have geographically bound the community in place, influencing their cultural and economic practices (Helm, 1961). Studying Indigenous im/mobility in Tłı̨t̨ı̨s'ė́hkédélı̨ offers a compelling case study that integrates traditional practices—including physical, emotional, cultural, and spiritual relationships to the land—within the framework of cultural resilience and colonization in the Canadian North.

Although we aim to explore Indigenous im/mobility independent from these influences, it is essential to acknowledge that they continue to play a significant, though not totalizing, role in shaping the lived context through which im/mobility occurs in Tłı̨t̨ı̨s'ė́hkédélı̨.

In 2006, the mobility paradigm (Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006) entered the academic lexicon, later expanding into the broader framework of im/mobility (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020). The paradigm drew attention to the social, cultural, political, and economic relations that inform how people, information, and objects move through time and space (Baldwin et al., 2019; Büscher & Urry, 2009; Ferentzy, 2009). Later, in 2018, the mobility paradigm took a critical turn with the introduction of mobility justice, emphasizing the structural inequalities among class, gender, culture, race, sex, space, and climate that unevenly mediate how and when movement occurs (Sheller, 2020; Wiegel et al., 2019).

The available scholarship has integrated Indigeneity among other socially inscribed intersectional identity markers, such as race, gender, and class, to argue that im/mobility can reinforce settler colonialism and the strength of the settler nation-state (Carpio et al., 2022). This is consistent with other work that focuses on im/mobility and forms of cultural suppression (Cidro et al., 2020; Marino & Lazrus, 2015), including through language (Russell, 2018), wellbeing (Ayebe-Karlsson et al., 2024), climate and environmental changes (Marino, 2012), and rural-urban migration (Howard & Lobo, 2013; Lewis et al., 2024). These works focus on the influence of settler-colonial structural forces on limiting Indigenous im/mobility and how individuals and communities are responding to these limitations. This is particularly evident in the literature focused on small island developing nations, which show that Indigenous im/mobility practices are embodiments of ancestral land, cultural, and spiritual relations and knowledge systems that enable communities to stay in place amidst the threats of ocean-level rise and forced displacement (Farbotko, 2018, 2022). Thus, the available literature shows that Indigenous im/mobility pre-dates colonial influence and is ongoing.

As Simpson explains, “[Indigenous] mobility shatters and refuses the containment of settler colonialism and inserts Indigenous presence” (2017, p. 196). This underscores that im/mobility is a facet of pre- and anti-colonial ways of life, encompassing Indigenous knowledge, tradition, culture, and relations to land, language, and survival (Prout, 2014; Standfield, 2018; Whyte et al., 2019). Despite recent advancements towards justice-oriented perspectives and approaches, there remains a historical demographic bias that prioritizes Western perspectives and sidelines Indigenous im/mobility voices and experiences (Ballantyne, 2018; Carey & Lydon, 2014; Prout Quicke & Green, 2018; Standfield, 2018). Significant gaps remain in understanding Indigenous im/mobility’s multifaceted nature (Carpio et al., 2022). This highlights the need for an examination of culturally grounded narratives that shape im/mobility, offering insight onto how Indigenous agency is asserted and practiced.

Indigenous communities have ancient im/mobility traditions that lie at the foundation of governance structures, knowledge, and political ethos (Whyte et al., 2019). Further, these traditions are “fundamental to an...individual’s social identity” (Standfield, 2018c, p. 17). As Simpson writes, “Indigenous people and our mobility can certainly be an expression of agency and self-determination” (2017, p. 197). For instance, Turner and Clifton (2009) document how Gitga’at Nation relies on oral histories for documented travel routes and methods of travel, specifically of tidal currents to help ensure safe ocean passage and knowledge of red-cedar tree trunks to safely construct canoe and sustain traditional knowledge—tying together cultural practices, knowledge, and im/mobility. Thus, Indigenous im/mobility is more than practices of movement and stasis on the land; they are embodiments of land-based epistemologies, political autonomy, knowledge, and sovereignty (Bräuchler & Ménard, 2017a; Farbotko, 2022; Ochoa Espejo, 2020; Prout Quicke & Green, 2018; Suliman et al., 2019; Yumagulova et al., 2023).

Carpio et al. (2022) argue that land-based and relational approaches can effectively theorize discussions on “more-than-human relations, and mutual responsibility” (p. 5). A relational approach challenges conventional notions of im/mobility drivers by illustrating the ongoing relationships Indigenous Peoples maintain with the land, “their dignity and self-sufficiency” (Simpson, 2017, p. 196), and cultural and spiritual relations (Suliman et al., 2019; Tabe, 2019) through im/mobility. That is, land-based frameworks integrate lived experiences, knowledge, and ethics to instill reciprocal relationships with the land (Coulthard, 2014; Coulthard & Simpson, 2016).

In essence, adopting a land-based lens to explore Indigenous im/mobility can reveal how Indigenous im/mobility is “integrally tied to the very earth system itself” (Whyte et al., 2019, p. 320), and how Indigenous peoples assert agency through im/mobility on their ancestral lands (Farbotko, 2018). This approach can expose the complex interplay between Indigenous worldviews and im/mobility practices, highlighting ongoing achievements of community and cultural survivance.

Relational Methodology

Before proceeding, it is important to situate the worldview and experiences that inform our team’s approaches to this work, thereby contextualizing the research process, findings, and dissemination methods (Wilson, 2008). Our research team includes Tłtsh’ehkédélı community members, Elders, settler university researchers, and settler graduate students who are building on decades of community-led climate change adaptation work spearheaded by local Elders. This research arises from an intercultural collaboration that our team co-organized and co-facilitated. This included several community-based workshops and gatherings to discuss how residents are

responding to climatic and environmental changes that are affecting health, education, food security, economic development, and wellness.

This study employed a methodological framework informed by Indigenous methodologies. Indigenous methodologies prioritize Indigenous ways of knowing, which shape the epistemological, ethical, and relational processes of research (Kovach, 2009; Stronach & Adair, 2014). These methodologies emphasize relations to the self, community, land, the spirit world, and the past, present, and future as the foundations of knowledge and interpretation (Ljubicic et al., 2022; Wilson, 2008). Accordingly, this research is anchored in relationships through processes of participant recruitment, data collection and analysis, and knowledge mobilization (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2021).

This work relies on the concept of relational accountability, which suggests that knowledge rests between human-human, human-non-human, and non-human-non-human entities, all of which are relational and accountable to each other (Reo, 2019; Wilson, 2008). It emphasizes a horizontal structure in the production and distribution of research and knowledge, recognizing the importance of respectful collaboration among participants and non-participants, including community members and the land (Datta, 2018; Ljubicic et al., 2022; Wilson, 2008). It maintains that through relationships, knowledge can be transferred (Woodworth et al., 2025). Consequently, this work's methodological focus is on fostering good relationships that sustain the wellbeing of all relationally involved (Absolon, 2010; Rameka, 2016). In adhering to these principles, this research has been collaboratively constructed, performed, interpreted, and shared with all relations through community events and feasts.

Data collection occurred from August 2022 to April 2024, including a six-month period where the lead author lived in Tłtsh'ehkédélj. Kovach (2021, p. 107) notes that "Indigenous

ethical research lives in relationship and requires vigilance and honesty, it requires truth for trust.” Ethical research approaches are determined by the unique, ongoing relationships shared by each participant and the researchers. Applying this principle, data for this research was collected using semi-structured interviews that drew on the relationships sustained between the researcher, participants, and im/mobility. To identify the relational influence, the lead author kept detailed field notes and a reflexive field journal that was used to inform each unique interview process, protocol, and question guide. This research was approved by Wilfrid Laurier University’s Research Ethics Board (#6992), Aurora Research Institute (#5356), and Tłtsh’Éh Kédélj First Nation Chief and Council.

The detailed field notes, reflexive research journal, and relationships built and maintained before, during, and after the prolonged field experience helped the lead author develop relational knowledge of himself, the participants, and the community. This knowledge was used to inform each participant’s interview guide. While themes like childhood memories on the land, present-day im/mobility experiences, and the impacts of school and work on im/mobility were common across all interviews, each participant was offered a unique guide based on the existing relationship and shared knowledge between the participant and researcher. For example, Jonas, a land user with a boat, was asked about his experiences boating on the Dehcho (Mackenzie River), and participants without motorized transportation were asked about how that affects their particular experiences of immobility. This offered a well-rounded data set that focused on the unique im/mobility knowledge and experiences that each participant could best speak to. Participants were offered financial compensation (aligning with both the community’s and university’s protocols), tobacco, and a small challah (a special bread in the lead author’s culture) in gratitude for their participation.

The research population consisted of the Tłtłets' éhkédélį community. The sample included adult members (18 years or older) who resided in the community and were willing and able to participate in an interview. When members were approached for an interview, often at their residence, they were offered the approved university research ethics board consent form, a copy of the interview questions, and a plain-language summary of the research objectives and goals. Participants had several days to review the documents without the researcher present. Participants were then re-engaged, the lead author responded to any questions, and if they consented, an interview date, time, and location were collaboratively determined. This informed-consent process offered participants the time and space to enter the research process knowing the questions they would be asked and how their responses would be used.

Interview locations included personal living rooms, cabins out on the land, smoke houses, and benches by the riverbank. The locations were collaboratively chosen by the participants and researcher and were based on the themes and topics to be discussed, the time of year, and the participants' other life commitments. For instance, an interview centered on snowshoes was conducted in a car while traveling to harvest wood for crafting snowshoes and an interview about the importance of the river took place beside the riverbank. This approach not only integrated first-hand im/mobility experiences into the research but also emphasized im/mobility through place and time in the interviews.

The data used to inform this article includes the lead author's field journal and 17 interviews with 23 participants. Elders (aged 60 +), adults (aged 30-60), and youth (aged 18-30) were interviewed for this research. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes, and they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Depending on the participants' wishes, interviews were either conducted individually or in groups. The interview recordings and

transcripts remain the property of Tłı̨t̨s'ė́hkédélj First Nation. Permission for use of the transcripts was explicit in the informed consent and licencing process, which involved community members reviewing the methods and intended output. Each participant received a copy of their transcript to review and validate before we began our thematic analysis. Participants chose whether to be quoted directly or to have their responses paraphrased in the research outputs. They also had the option of being identified by name or remaining anonymous. Consequently, some quotes used in this paper are attributed to participants by name, while others are labelled “community member”.

At all stages of this research, we put respectful, reciprocal, and responsible research relationships at the forefront (Kovach, 2009, 2021; Menzies, 2001; Smith, 2021). We ensured that participants were as informed and involved as possible; we offered them time, space, and support to outline their own participatory parameters; and we framed our interview conversations on relationships of trust, sharing, and mutual benefit.

Thematic analysis was used to identify common influences within the data set (Lee et al., 2018). We followed Kovach's (2021) six-step process for thematic analysis: (1) drawing on tenets of Indigenous theoretical frameworks, such as relational methodologies, (2) coding the data, (3) looking at the relationships between the codes, (4) recentering the theoretical framework in the data and analysis, (5) identifying themes from the codes, and (6) recognizing the statements and ideas that are outliers from the themes. Through this process, three im/mobility themes stood out as the most dominant and impactful: connecting with the land, subsistence autonomy, and transmitting Traditional Knowledge. While other themes, such as cultural well-being, Dene values, and education emerged, they were not as recurrent in the data interpretation. While not central to the analysis, these less emergent themes, and those considered outliers, have been integrated into the discussion to retain their value in the findings.

A common shortcoming to thematic analysis, particularly among relationally-informed research with Indigenous Peoples, is that it isolates key statements and ideas from the relations and context in which they emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2023; Kovach, 2021). Although we cannot deny the extractive process of determining which quotes to use to present a particular argument, we have tried to present our findings as a coherent community-informed narrative that highlights specific participants in the times and spaces where their knowledge and ideas are most relationally grounded. To further root our analysis in the community and our relationships, we presented our interpretations, thoughts, and findings to community members several times, both formally through presentations and informally through discussions over coffee. In addition, we took time to re-situate ourselves in the community, as recommended by Kovach (2021), to validate the relevance of our identified research themes before developing research outputs, including this paper.

Tłtsets'éhkédélj im/mobility dynamics

The findings section is thematically structured around three dominant Tłtsets'éhkédélj Got'ie im/mobility influences: connecting with the land, subsistence autonomy, and transmitting Traditional Knowledge. The subsequent discussion section examines each influence to explore how they shape Tłtsets'éhkédélj im/mobility.

Connecting with the land

Indigenous people in the Northwest Territories have strong spiritual and cultural connections to the land, which include plants, animals, water, and cosmos (Coulthard, 2014). In the context of im/mobility, the land encompasses spiritual, cultural, identity, and political relations

that evolve through movement across time and space (Prout, 2014). It serves not only as the physical infrastructure for im/mobility but it is also intertwined with identities, ways of life, and traditions that bridge ancestral relations in the present and future generations (Prout, 2014).

Stan, a former Chief of the community, articulates these connections by stating that “as guardians, we’re here to take care of the land that was given to us by the Creator, to protect and care for it, and the animals and trees as much as we know how to, to survive” (June 6, 2023). In return, the land gives food (Donna, May 31, 2024), medicine (Victoria, May 8, 2024), water (Marilyn, May 10, 2023), and knowledge (Arial, June 10, 2023).

Traditionally, Tthets’éhkédélj Got’ie practiced im/mobility throughout their traditional territory, where human movement and stasis were influenced by changing seasons, food and resource availability, and the intergenerational knowledge of how to co-exist with the land (community member, May 31, 2023). This is commonly described as seasonal rounds, where Indigenous life, hunting, and harvesting localities shift with changing seasons to help conserve and protect non-human species, sustain an ecological balance, and facilitate in-depth relationships to the land (Davidson-Hunt & Berkes, 2004).

Seasonal rounds were made possible by a variety of mobility practices, including walking, paddling traditional canoes, and dog teams (Richard, April 21, 2023). The ancestors of the current Tthets’éhkédélj Got’ie moved and wintered around the “Fish Lakes”, including Tthets’eh K’é (McGill Lake), Dechj Náiʔa (Deep Lake), Tłok’á K’e (Ekalia Lake), Tłonje (Sanguez Lake), and Tłtęttj (Gargan Lake), and passed the summer months around the confluence of the Jean Marie River and the Dehcho (Margaret, April 4, 2024). This routinized movement enabled access to seasonally rich resources while ensuring that “certain areas or resources were not overharvested” (Stan, June 6, 2023). Furthermore, the rounds were the medium through which in-depth knowledge

of the local land and resources was shared between community members, including Elders and youth, further informing members on where and when to harvest food (Jonas, June 9, 2023) and medicines (Donna, May 31, 2023). Today, many of the same routes are still used, now accessed by skidoo rather than dog team, and motorboats rather than canoes, and quads and trucks where roads and trails allow (Field Notes, June 5, 2023). These technologies shape how and when people can reach, teach, and learn about harvesting sites, affecting timing, effort, and accessibility of land-based practices. Yet, they also bring challenges and concerns around the cost of gas and maintenance, as well as environmental changes that affect trail access and safety.

Im/mobility can help facilitate the exchange of land-based knowledge (Yumagulova et al., 2023). A community member emphasizes that cultural transmission from the land is “a practical thing” and that “you need to be there at that time and in that moment to experience [it]” (March 20, 2024). The land offers opportunities for the community to develop social norms and institutions, including those related to im/mobility, which foster relationships among individuals, communities, and the land (Whyte et al., 2019). Medina recalls an outing with her siblings and friends to a place called “m̐h enjaets’ ehgo” (where the fish nets are pushed away from the shore) to picnic, swim, and collect freshwater clams (June 8, 2023). Donna (May 31, 2023), Victoria (May 8, 2023), Rufus (May 19, 2023), and other community members recount similar experiences, highlighting the significance of the land in bringing the community together to harvest, fish, swim, and play. Margaret explains that being out on the land, interacting with other community members, including youth and Elders, as well as the various plants and animals, allowed the Ttets’ éhkédélì Got’ie to live their language and culture (April 4, 2024). Being out on the land, either moving across it or resting in place, allowed the youth to observe cultural norms and practices, learn about

the land, and absorb the community's language and traditions (Arial, June 10, 2023; Bräuchler & Ménard, 2017).

These mobility-practices are essential to sustaining Dene ways of life. The land, made accessible through mobility practices, forms the foundation for social and cultural elements, including language, politics, and governance (Whyte et al., 2019). Im/mobility encourages direct engagement with diverse ecosystems, allowing community members to continuously learn from and engage with the land, essential components of Traditional Knowledge and Dene cultural practices (Woodworth et al., 2025). Moreover, these ongoing relations to the land, practiced through im/mobility, ensure that language and culture are actively transmitted across generations, fostering a shared identity and sense of belonging within the community—integral aspects of Indigeneity.

Subsistence Autonomy

The land offers unique subsistence opportunities at specific times and places (Whyte et al., 2019). Around Tthets'éhkédélj, different food sources are accessed depending on the seasonal conditions and timing: the fish are best harvested in the winter (community member, May 31, 2023), the beavers in the springtime are most abundant (Angus, May 19, 2023), and the moose in the autumn at the muskeg are most plentiful (Anthony, June 10, 2023). Historically, community members would travel along the Dehcho for months on end, harvesting fish and meat to bring back to the community and preserve for the winter months (community member, June 8, 2023). This wider traditional food economy included seasonal travel into areas like Edézhzhìe (Richard, April 21, 2023), whereas harvesting today tends to focus more locally—particularly around the Five Lakes—due to its proximity.

Im/mobility also shapes individual and family differences in how people access food and resources. Some members regularly travel on the land throughout the Dehcho Region year-round (Howie, May 16, 2023; Jonas, June 9, 2023; community member, May 31, 2023), while others remain close to home, more limited by access to motorized vehicles and physical ability (community member, May 19, 2023; community member, June 8, 2023). These findings align with other publications that suggest Indigenous im/mobility practices respond to subsistence autonomy, resource opportunity, and the shifting locations of land-based food availability (see Gilbert, 2007; Prout Quicke & Green, 2018; Yumagulova et al., 2023).

Mobility practices enable access to local traditional land-based subsistence needs, including hunting and harvesting (Khan et al., 2024), as well access to the nearest grocery store, 128 kilometers away by road in Łíídlıı Kúé (Fort Simpson). At the grocery store, community members can supplement land-based foods to meet their dietary needs (Anthony, June 10, 2023). Present-day subsistence mobility, therefore, supports food security by combining traditional land-based practices with store bought foods. Anthony describes how he and his partner navigate this mixed food system:

Well, you know, we eat both. Vegetables are a big thing we buy. When we go to the grocery store, we mostly buy vegetables because we usually have either frozen store-bought meat or wild game meat or fish or whatever [at home]...but we still harvest...we do it as a choice... (June 10, 2023)

Navigating a blended food system requires creativity and adaptability (community member, May 31, 2023). This often involves freezing meats, fruits, and vegetables for later consumption and

incorporating these frozen goods with traditional, land-based foods to meet nutrition and subsistence needs (Connie, May 16, 2023).

The introduction of refrigerators, freezers, grocery stores, and the continental road network has provided new opportunities for the Tłı̨t̨s'ė́hkédélı́ Got'ie to ensure their food security. This aligns with findings that suggest Indigenous communities across Canada are increasingly reliant on store-bought foods to meet their dietary needs (Luongo et al., 2020).

Yet not all community members access mobility evenly, resulting in less sovereign and secure food systems for some. One Tłı̨t̨s'ė́hkédélı́ community member without automotive access to the land or grocery stores shares, “it’s not easy” to ensure food security for themselves or their family (June 8, 2023). They rely on family members for transportation to grocery stores, for traditionally harvested foods, and to teach their son how the Dene harvest (June 8, 2023). They explain that,

[My son is] mainly out on the land with two people: my dad, and his uncle. And my dad can show him only so much because he’s turning 88 and [his uncle] can show him what my dad is not showing him. So, the way I look at it, he’ll have experience from a younger version and older version way of doing things [on the land]. (June 8, 2023)

This example underscores how mobility and immobility are shaped by age, physical ability, and access to transportation technologies. Here, the lack of personal access to a quad or vehicle limits the parent’s own land-use; nevertheless, through the combined mobilities of his grandfather and his uncle, the son’s learning is possible. Intergenerational teaching still occurs through familial networks that transmit the capacity and knowledge to move and harvest. Thanks to familial

networks, the Tłtsets'éhkédélj values, protocols, and motivations regarding subsistence will be intergenerationally passed down from grandfather and uncle to the younger generation (community member, June 8, 2023; Ingold, 2000). This further illustrates that im/mobility is not simply about moving or not—it encompasses a spectrum of constraints and opportunities that shape who can participate in land-based practices and how knowledge is shared across generations.

The Tłtsets'éhkédélj Got'ie rely on the land and its seasonal resource availability to access a variety of resources (Stan, June 6, 2023; community member, March 20, 2024). At a local scale, encompassing the immediate land surrounding the community, im/mobility is crucial for members to engage in routine hunting and harvesting practices in the areas close to home, thereby sustaining their traditional ways of life and food systems in everyday practice. These regular short-term movements between the land and the community enable members to enjoy the land's offering, inclusive of berries, fish, and game (community member, March 20, 2024).

Transmitting Traditional Knowledge

Tłtsets'éhkédélj im/mobility is informed by culturally relevant and relational Traditional Knowledge systems. Traditional Knowledge encompasses the collective knowledge, skills, innovations, and worldviews intergenerationally passed and shared among a community or culture (C. Butler & Menzies, 2007). For the Dene in the Northwest Territories, many traditional teachings come from Yamoria (whose name translates as “the one who travels”) (Blondin, 1997). Yamoria established the Dene Laws, which sustain peace among humans, animals, and the land through relationships built on mutual respect and well-being (Blondin, 1997). These laws have translated into traditional teachings that are rooted in the customs, values, and beliefs of the Dene people,

and, as Margaret explains, “a lot of people took [those] teachings and [still] live [by them]” (April 4, 2024).

The Dene Laws help to inform present-day movements on the land by structuring cultural values and protocols in im/mobility experiences. They influence local and regional im/mobility routines, routes, and timing, including moments of stasis that are interlinked with movement. Victoria shares an example of the Dene Laws influencing her movements and lack thereof through time and space:

So, the captain and I would [stop and] say a prayer [before we left port]. And so that became a part of our journey. Like, we’re not leaving until we do this kind of thing... I’ve done it since I was a little girl, my grandma taught me. You respect the land, and you respect the water and ask the Creator to look after us and to bring us home safely [and then you go].
(May 8, 2023)

Victoria’s routine reflects relational truths, meanings, and beliefs that exist beyond Western im/mobility ontologies and epistemologies—a worldview in which the land and water have agency and the ability to listen to prayers, receive thanks, and create safer im/mobility experiences (Margaret, April 4, 2024; Suliman et al., 2019). This perspective is embodied by Tthets’ėhkédélį community members when they stop their movement and offer tobacco to the land before resuming travel again (June 8, 2023), and by Richard (April 21, 2023) and Jonas (June 9, 2023) who pray before harvesting medicines.

Observation and experience are fundamental aspects of Traditional Knowledge (Maldonado et al., 2015). “After you travel certain paths...,” Howard explains, “you’ll know the

land” (May 16, 2023). Understanding the land—including animal migratory patterns for hunting and harvesting, weather trends, and plant life cycles—is a pivotal component of Traditional Knowledge (Coulthard, 2014; Coulthard & Simpson, 2016). This knowledge, in turn, informs key practices, including where and when to hunt moose (community member, May 31, 2023), when to harvest berries (Connie, May 16, 2023), how to recognize when the ice is too dangerous to travel across (Arial, June 10, 2023), and how to access culturally and spiritually significant sites (community member, June 8, 2023; Stan, June 6, 2023). Furthermore, these observations and experiences that develop across time and space are foundational to relationships with the land (community member, May 19, 2023). In other words, im/mobility facilitates a relationship between people and the land, through which Traditional Knowledge is applied across cultural, livelihood, and governance practices.

The means of movement—whether walking, paddling, or driving—are themselves part of what is taught and passed on. Knowing how to read the trail, how to steer on river bends and navigate rocks, or how to maintain and repair a skidoo, becomes, and is an embodiment, of land-based literacy (Woodworth et al., 2025). When community members express the importance of transmitting this specialized knowledge to youth, they are looking to the capacity of future generations to inhabit and move about the land in ways that sustain that relationship.

Discussion

Shifts in conceptual thinking about Indigenous Peoples have already reshaped several domains of policy, including healthcare (Linklater, 2014) and education (Woodworth et al., 2025). In both fields, the research advocates for culturally safe approaches that recognize the importance of land-based practices. Yet, despite these advancements, policy approaches to im/mobility remain

constrained by Western assumptions and ideologies on movement, decision-making, autonomy, time, and space. This paper argues that im/mobility also requires this critical reorientation within policy. We propose reframing im/mobility as a relational practice embedded in reciprocal land-based relationships and knowledge systems, thereby aligning with the literature that calls for more contextually and culturally grounded approaches.

Understanding the relationship between connecting with the land, subsistence autonomy, and transmitting Traditional Knowledge offers a holistic perspective that highlights Indigenous ways of knowing. Specifically, it exposes how im/mobility is relationally tethered to reciprocal relations with the land. This offers a departure from Western approaches that use unique drivers to conceptualize binary human-centric decision making processes (Van Hear et al., 2018) that sustain the ontological separation of humans and nature (Cronon, 1996).

Focusing on the relationships between key influences allows for a nuanced understanding of Indigenous im/mobility. For example, Margaret, an Elder in the community, illustrates a relational approach to im/mobility through a story that outlines subsistence, traditional knowledge, and a connection with the land in the context of im/mobility.

I remember when I was young, [my family would] go up the Mackenzie River, and we [were going to] a creek that has good fish in it. I just remember we were going to leave, but the wind was blowing in the way we were going to be traveling, [it] was blowing us into the land. So, we stopped, and [my dad] just went into the bush. So, I asked my mother, what is he doing there? Your father is praying and paying the river. So, we waited and waited. And then sometime later, he came back. By then it just seems like the wind and the water settled down enough that we could cross. So, I always remember that doing these

kinds of things like praying and feeding and praying to the water or the land, it works.
(April 4, 2024)

Although previously existing conceptual models (see Black, Bennett, et al., 2011; Carling & Schewel, 2018; Van Hear et al., 2018) could offer a lens to understand Margaret's story, they lack consideration for the relational and reciprocal context that deeply shapes her family's experience. For example, her story shows how subsistence autonomy, connecting with the land, and transmitting Traditional Knowledge simultaneously occur through im/mobility. Moreover, their choice to pause during travel due to adverse environmental conditions showcases a respect for the land's teachings and rhythms. Her father's actions of praying and making offerings to the land reflect Traditional Knowledge and demonstrate reciprocity, reinforcing ethical engagement with the land for future generations (Hart, 2010). These actions uphold a relationship where respect for the land supports subsistence needs and facilitates the intergenerational transfer of Traditional Knowledge across generations. Margaret's story is indicative of a form of im/mobility embedded in the land, transcending Western im/mobility approaches and meanings, illustrating how relations, including with humans, the land, water, sky, and non-humans, shape im/mobility practices.

This relational perspective offers a theoretical approach to im/mobility that is consistent with other Indigenous literatures. It articulates the relationships at the base of reciprocal practices, the ongoing exchange of well-being and benefit among humans and non-humans, including the land, water, and animals, that influence im/mobility (Hart, 2010; Kimmerer, 2013; Ødegaard, 2016). Or, as explained by Simpson (2017), "it's respect, it's relationship, it's responsibility, and it's local" (p. 75). In this context, reciprocal relations guide im/mobility practices, trajectories, and experiences to instill mutual respect, honour, and well-being with the land (Ødegaard, 2016). This

approach encompasses land-based relations that cannot be independently evaluated, thereby offering an alternative, culturally grounded approach to im/mobility.

Relational approaches can also nuance conceptualization of existing im/mobility models as they relate to Indigenous experiences. For instance, Indigenous Peoples, particularly youth, often face a presumed dichotomy in im/mobility decision making: immobility in relation to the desire to stay in place to practice culture, or mobility as reflected in competing desires to move to urban spaces for education, economic, and career opportunities (Hofstede et al., 2023; Howard & Lobo, 2013; Toivanen, 2022). A relational perspective troubles this binary by showing that both movement and stillness are shaped by land-based obligations, highlighting uniquely Indigenous relationships with the land, subsistence autonomy, and the transmission of Traditional Knowledge that inform im/mobility practices. It broadens and nuances our understanding of why Indigenous People move and/or stay, and calls for a conceptual approach that centers dynamic, reciprocal relationships with the land as foundational to Indigenous worldviews and practices.

Relationally approaching im/mobility reveals the broader and interconnected sets of social, political, economic, cultural, spiritual, and land-based relations that shape uniquely Indigenous patterns of movement and stillness (Wiegel et al., 2019). Its emphasis on reciprocity highlights the significance of relationships and mutual wellbeing in sustaining and sharing knowledge (Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Consequently, this decolonizing approach moves beyond Western knowledges, worldviews, and perspectives. In doing so, it opens theoretical possibility for examining the multiple, nuanced, and diverse structures that shape im/mobility. It also signals a clear imperative for policymakers to realign their assumptions, priorities, and interventions—shifting away from reactively managing movement as a problem or challenge and towards

supporting im/mobility as a form of cultural practice, relational continuity, and land-based governance (Farbotko, 2018).

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the values behind Indigenous im/mobility are relational and based in reciprocity: connecting with the land fosters subsistence autonomy, while both subsistence autonomy and connecting with the land shape Traditional Knowledge, and the transmission of Traditional Knowledge enables connection with the land and subsistence autonomy. Additionally, this study's focus on Indigenous voices and perspectives showcases a decolonized approach to im/mobility that is culturally and contextually relevant for Indigenous Peoples and communities (Boas et al., 2022).

Local im/mobility is a core facet of cultural practice; however, it is rarely a focal point in Canadian policy efforts. Current Canadian policy tends to advocate for cultural revitalization—most evident through language-based programming (Schreyer, 2008). This study suggests that im/mobility should be recognized as not an outcome of external factors and dynamics but as a core axis through which cultural, political, economic, social, and environmental decisions are made and embodied. At the same time, it recognizes that present day im/mobility is a product of colonial conditions that are shaped by state policies, including colonial governance structures and constraints, that limit Indigenous Peoples' movements across their traditional territories. As such, a systemic, relational approach to im/mobility policy design would help to ensure that programs and support systems respond to the dynamic, place-based relationships that Indigenous communities have and continue to embody on their traditional territories. Moreover, such an

approach may help to align policy with the nuanced realities of land-based life, particularly in the context of climate change and ongoing colonization.

It is crucial to recognize that Indigenous Peoples and communities are also forced to navigate Western colonial legacies through their lived experiences, including im/mobility. Present-day im/mobility patterns cannot be separated from historical processes, such as forced relation, land dispossession, and the imposition of reserves. These historical pressures continue to intersect with modern day challenges, including environmental change (Cameron, 2012; Whyte et al., 2019). Yet, as Whyte and colleagues (2019) note, “Indigenous people offer important starting points that serve to re-historicize and re-contextualize concerns about environmental change” (p. 311). Therefore, an examination of present-day Indigenous im/mobility can be enhanced by an investigation of how Indigenous Peoples and communities are responding to environmental change through im/mobility. In subsequent work, we aim to explore the dynamics of environmental change in relation to Tłtsets’ éhkédélj im/mobility.

The findings of this research broaden the discourse on im/mobility justice by foregrounding Indigenous values and perspectives, thereby supporting the growing body of scholarship that illuminates Indigenous worldviews in relation to im/mobility (Farbotko, 2018; Suliman et al., 2019; Yumagulova et al., 2023). Specifically, this study offers a relational and reciprocal approach to address Indigenous im/mobility in a way that honours cultural traditions and relationships to the land. It can orient policymakers to alternative, non-Western relationalities that shape and structure im/mobility, offering culturally grounded strategies for supporting movement and rootedness that reflect Indigenous autonomy and well-being. It also provides a different starting point for research that seeks to understand the interaction between Indigenous im/mobility agency and colonial relations and structures that impose external pressures for movement or stasis.

The insights gained highlight the relationships to land, culture, and available resources, underscoring Indigenous resilience and cultural survivance (Vizenor, 2008). These findings have practical implications for culturally grounded, community-based programs and events that include language revitalization, land-use planning, and the intergenerational transfer of Traditional Knowledge. Policymakers can also implement these findings into decision-making processes to effectively co-develop initiatives and programs that support Indigenous self-determination in im/mobility, such as regional harvesting funds, mobile infrastructure for land-based education, or community-driven land use planning.

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Figure 13 Teaching and Learning, by Sophie Rivers

Chapter 4: Exploring relationality in climate im/mobility: A study of Tthets'éhkédélj First Nation

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Abstract

Climate change continues to profoundly disrupt the cultural and land-based practices that sustain Indigenous Peoples, communities, and ways of life. Understanding how these disruptions fit into the dominant academic debates—particularly through the maximalist and minimalist perspectives on climate induced migration and non-migration—reveals the complexity and nuance of land-based relationships. While maximalist perspectives frame climate as a primary, external driver of movement and minimalist perspectives emphasize socio-cultural and political mediators, we argue that the relational dimensions of land-based im/mobility offer an alternative approach to understanding movement across time and space. Based on 17 empirically grounded, relationally informed interviews with 23 participants from Tthets'éhkédélj (or Jean Marie River, Dehcho region of the Northwest Territories), this paper advocates for a relational im/mobility approach that honours Indigenous epistemologies and land-based practices, demonstrating how movement and stasis are shaped by both climate change and cultural continuity. We use berry harvesting, a practice influenced by the land, climate change, and socio-political factors, to explore Indigenous im/mobility practices. Findings show how environmental changes, cultural practices, and Traditional Knowledge (among other structural factors) are entangled with im/mobility practices. This approach situates climate change and im/mobility as entangled processes that reinforce cultural, social, and political ecological relationships.

Keywords: Indigenous im/mobility, climate change, cultural identity, berries, Tłı̨chı̨ ʼéhkédélı̨
First Nation: Dehcho

Introduction

North American Indigenous people and communities have historically relied on patterns of movement and stasis across their land to ensure their spiritual, cultural, mental, and physical survival (Newbold, 2004; Newton et al., 2005; Standfield, 2018; Whyte et al., 2019). These patterns are intricately tied to cyclical and ongoing relationships with the land, subsistence, and traditional knowledge (Farbotko, 2018; Whyte et al., 2019). As the biophysical climate continues to shift (Box et al., 2019), the impacts are felt across land-based relationships, thereby affecting culture, food systems, and ways of life (Whyte, 2017), including im/mobility practices.

Im/mobility refers to the dynamic interplay of movement and stasis across land, time, and space (Boas et al., 2022; Robertson et al., 2018). It encompasses both short and prolonged forms of movement and stasis, including migration and non-migration (Atanasova et al., 2024), that are influenced by social structures and individual agencies (de Haas, 2021; Sheller, 2023). Recent literature has focused on Indigenous perspectives and worldviews to reveal the patriarchal and colonially disrupted ecologies, including climate change (Boas et al., 2022), that shape relationships to time, place, and im/mobility (Farbotko, 2018; Sheller, 2023; Whyte, 2017).

The intersections of climate change and im/mobility have been theorized as climate im/mobility, which examines the influence of climate change on patterns and histories of movement over time and space (Boas et al., 2022). It encapsulates a range of spatially and temporally short, long, linear, and non-linear experiences that are contingent upon various “geographical categories—[such as] space, place, territory, sovereignty, citizenship, transnationalism, borders, nature, mobility, and scale” (Baldwin, 2014, p. 516). Scholars agree that

climate im/mobility is a “multi-scalar and relational” process (Boas et al., 2022, p. 3368) that gives meaning to how, when, and where people move through time and space (Boas et al., 2022; Sheller & Urry, 2006).

Early theoretical discussion on the influence of climate change on human im/mobility patterns revolved around two distinct categories: maximalist and minimalist (McLeman, 2013; Sciacaluga, 2020; Veronis et al., 2018). The maximalists suggest that climate change is the primary driver influencing mobility (Piguet, 2013). There has been ample critique of the maximalist perspective, suggesting it is alarmist (Sciacaluga, 2020) and overlooks empirical data that points towards a complex range of interconnected natural and social systems (Morrissey, 2012; Piguet, 2013). Nevertheless, it effectively encourages researchers and policymakers to better account for the role of climate change in shaping im/mobility patterns (Piguet, 2013). The minimalist perspective, on the other hand, notes that the connections between climate change and human im/mobility are difficult to tease out and are based on a range of political, social, demographic, and economic considerations (Bro et al., 2024; McLeman, 2013).

Despite claims that scholarship is “moving beyond” discussions of the maximalist and minimalist debate (Veronis et al., 2018, p. 62), we argue that this binary continues to ground climate im/mobility scholarship (Brain, 2024; Jónsson, 2023). Further, building on claims that Indigenous climate im/mobility experiences remain under-theorized (Whyte et al., 2019), we suggest that Indigenous im/mobility experiences can offer a unique perspective to the climate im/mobility debate by exposing how relationships among land, culture, and movement are embodied outcomes of their reciprocal entanglement.

Research indicates that Indigenous im/mobility encompasses ongoing, systematic, and relational nexuses of movement and stasis (Ballantyne, 2018; Taylor & Bell, 2004; Marino, 2015)

that facilitate spiritual, cultural, mental, and physical survival (Newbold, 2004; Newton et al., 2005; Standfield, 2018; Whyte et al., 2019). However, the literature focusing on Indigenous people and their im/mobility is sparse in comparison to that of other social groups, specifically those of Western backgrounds (Ballantyne, 2018; Carey & Lydon, 2014). Despite this scarcity, the available Indigenous im/mobility research confirms that im/mobilities are fundamental to Indigenous daily life and relationships with land, knowledge, and language (Khalafzai et al., 2021; Standfield, 2018; Whyte et al., 2019), food security (Yumagulova et al., 2023), traditional medicinal practices (Gratani et al., 2016), mental and physical health and wellbeing (Boksa et al., 2015), and cultural identity (Fumoleau, 1984, 2004).

While previous research has illuminated important aspects of climate-induced im/mobility, it tends to rely on binary conceptualizations—such as staying or moving—that underpin the maximalist and minimalist debate. This framing reduces climate im/mobility to a simple one-time choice, overlooking the ongoing and relational practices that structure the ongoing lived experiences of im/mobility. In addition, it conceptually separates influential im/mobility factors into distinct measurable pieces that can be uniquely analyzed and evaluated (Bro et al., 2024), arguably effacing more complex questions about how those factors are interrelated.

The goal of this paper is to foreground Indigenous experiences and perspectives that emphasize land-based practices as central to im/mobility. We propose berry harvesting as an epistemological entry point to reframe climate-influenced im/mobility as recurring, short-term, non-linear relational process rooted in land, climate, and cultural continuity. Our objective is to show that im/mobility functions as an embodied relationship to climate change, land, and cultural continuity. We advocate for relational approaches that recognize land-based movements not as determinants of stay-or-move decisions but as integrated elements of how im/mobility is lived and

made meaningful. To do so, we explore Dene im/mobility practices in Ttsets'ėhkédélį (Jean Marie River) (Figure 13).

We begin by outlining the research context and reviewing the relevant literature. Subsequently, we present our methodological approach and discuss our findings.

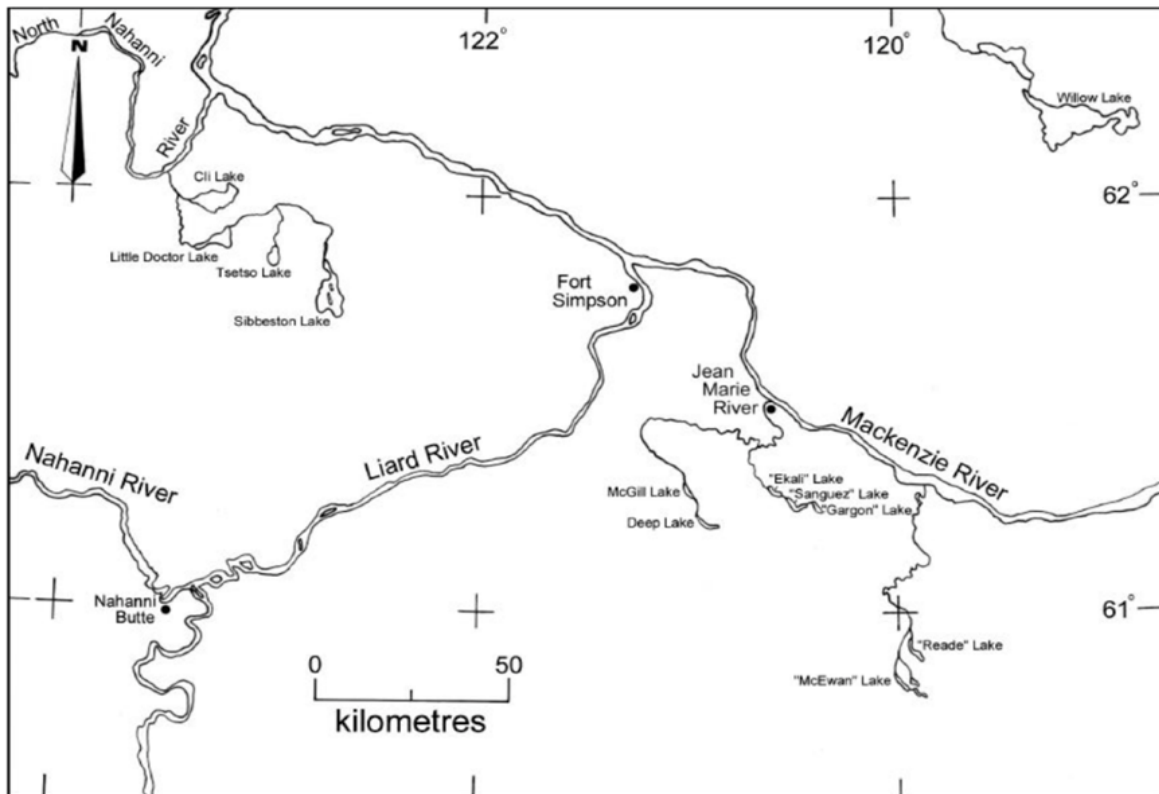


Figure 14: Map of Jean Marie River (Stewart et al., 2003).

Research Context

Ttsets'ėhkédélį (or TFN) is a Dene community with a population of 63 residents (Statistics Canada, 2021). The community's traditional lands are located in the Taiga Plains, characterized by rolling marshes, dense poplar, spruce, pine forests, and discontinuous permafrost (Camels et al., 2015). The community lies nearly 128 kilometers by road and 68 kilometers by river south of

Łíídlıı Kúę (Fort Simpson). The TFN vision statement reflects the community's values and future directions:

We the Tłı̨t̨ı̨s'ė́hkédélı̨ Got'ie, are proud of our Dene traditions, language, and beliefs. We value and respect the land, water, and animals that have sustained us for many generations. We shall continue to use and respect our natural resources. Building on the knowledge and skills of our people, we shall work together to create a healthy, sustainable future for ourselves and our children. We shall strive to find a balance between the traditional and modern ways of life. (Jean Marie River First Nation, n.d.)

Northern Canadian environments and residents have been among the first to experience rapid and widespread impacts of climate change (Box et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2013). Recent studies have identified the many effects of anthropogenic climate change on northern environments, focusing on rapid permafrost thaw (Carpino et al., 2018; Swindles et al., 2015), rising ocean levels (Moon et al., 2018), increased wildfire frequency and intensity (Dodd et al., 2018; Fazel-Rastgar & Sivakumar, 2022), the proliferation of invasive plant species (Pearson et al., 2013), and altered hydrological cycles (Wrona et al., 2016). While much of the academic and public im/mobility attention focuses on crisis moments—such as rapid-onset floods and fires (Khalafzai et al., 2021; Morritt-Jacobs, 2020; Tepley et al., 2022)—these acute events coincide with longer histories of slower moving processes of environmental, cultural, and political change. Understanding the layered context of im/mobility requires attention to the rapid-onset disruptions and also the more subtle, slow-onset changes that continuously shape movement and stasis over time (Luby, 2020; Marino, 2012).

TFN community members are facing both slow- and rapid-onset environmental disruption. In 2021, an ice jam downriver of TFN caused severe flooding, destroying homes, cars, and fuel tanks (Morritt-Jacobs, 2020). At a moment's notice, community members were forced to flee, some retreating to cabins further inland and others to Deh Gáh Got'įę (Fort Providence), 256 kilometers away. Two years later, while many in the community remained in the process of rebuilding, a wildfire threatened the community, once again forcing people out of their homes. Members drove through clouds of smoke and burning forest to Łíídlıı Kúé where, for weeks, they awaited a safe return home. These events are not isolated, but rather come layered atop existing colonial-induced challenges, including forced settlement and land dispossession (which have historically restricted access to traditional lands and adaptive capacity), that further exacerbate the lived experiences of climate change (Hauser et al., 2021; Whyte, 2017).

Despite these challenges and their ongoing legacies (including burnt and contaminated lands), the Tthets'ėhkédélį Got'ie (translated to the people downriver of McGill Lake) persist in their traditional ways of life and relationships with the land. Most residents continue to practice their connection to the land through hunting, harvesting, trapping, and fishing, which sustain their knowledge systems and promote spiritual, cultural, physical, and emotional well-being. The community's ongoing commitment to and embodiment of Dene culture, knowledge, and practices amidst the pressures of climate change offers an opportunity to explore the ongoing, dynamic relationship between land, culture, climate change, and human movement. The community's response to climate change is shaped by both moments of crisis and overall continuity, amidst ongoing and evolving relationships to land.

This study stems from an intercultural research project aimed at understanding how Tthets'ėhkédélį Got'ie are responding to climate changes on their land. Our research team includes

Elders, land users, community members, and settler researchers (tenured professors and graduate students), who each bring their own perspectives and ideas to the collaboration. This work builds on years of climate change adaptation research led by local Elders and is an outcome of our collaborative efforts to build and maintain respectful relationships. These efforts included several community-based workshops that brought members together to share in learning about community responses to the impacts of climate change on health, education, food security, economic development, and wellness. In the next sections, we review the relevant literature and offer our methodological approach before presenting our findings and discussion.

Human Movements Through Time and Space

Early theoretical debate on the intersections of climate change and human movement were largely shaped by two main perspectives: the maximalists and minimalists (Suhrke, 1994). These debates continue to structure how climate im/mobility is conceptualized in academic and policy contexts.

Maximalist – Minimalist Approaches

The maximalist approaches emphasize environmental change—such as rising sea levels (Marino, 2015) or drought (McLeman, 2013)—as primary im/mobility drivers. These studies tend to highlight im/mobility as a climate-adaptation strategy, depicting it as a direct response to environmental stressors (Black et al., 2011; Haeffner et al., 2018; Sciacaluga, 2020). Critics of the maximalist approach stress that it follows a linear and determinist logic and overlooks complex social, historical, and cultural contexts—including land-based relationships—that shape im/mobility (Morrissey, 2012; Sciacaluga, 2020; Veronis et al., 2018). It assumes a fragile relationship between humans and the environment that is easily broken and thus immediately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Courtoy, 2022). Moreover, the maximalist position

leads to the use and normalization of the term ‘climate refugee’ (Baldwin et al., 2014; Piguet, 2013)—which has since been problematized for its alarmist undertone (Sciaccaluga, 2020), its lack of recognition of human agency (Hunter et al., 2015; Veronis et al., 2018), and its reinstatement of colonial categories of the powerful and powerless in climate policy (Farbotko, 2022; Farbotko et al., 2020).

On the other side of the debate, scholars in support of the minimalist perspective have pointed to the multi-causal nature of im/mobility decision making (Bro et al., 2024; Hunter et al., 2015). Their work focuses on the political, social, economic, cultural, and demographic factors (Black et al., 2011; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019; Thornton et al., 2023), including self-efficacy, and perception of risk (Bro et al., 2024) and place attachment (Boas et al., 2022), that influence im/mobility patterns and experiences. These works help to expose how systemic influences, like global capitalism (Tan et al., 2023), mediate movement and stasis. The minimalist perspective tends to minimize the role of climate and land-based changes in influencing im/mobility practices, trajectories, and experiences; thus situating im/mobility among broader, uneven social power injustices and relations (Massey, 1994; Sheller, 2018).

Yet, minimalist perspectives are not without critics. By evenly distributing emphasis on various social and systemic factors, they risk obscuring the role of environmental dimensions in shaping movement altogether (Brain, 2024). While widely problematic across human populations, minimizing these dimensions especially overlook the deep and reciprocal relationships that structure Indigenous life and lived experiences (Farbotko, 2022; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019; Marino, 2015).

Despite their differences, both maximalist and minimalist approaches share key assumptions: they both treat climate change as an external, measurable force (Wiegel et al., 2019)

emplaced upon passive subjects (Veronis et al., 2018). They underplay human agency, particularly Indigenous agency, and alternative ontologies that frame movement not as a response to crisis, but as a culturally embedded and relational practice (Simpson, 2017; Whyte, 2017). We engage with the maximalist-minimalist debate both to counteract its problematic either/or framing and to highlight how Indigenous experiences and worldviews complicate its underlying assumptions about climate-induced im/mobility and propose an alternative position.

Relational Approaches

What both the maximalist and minimalist paradigms overlook are the small-scale, seasonal, and relational im/mobilities that characterize life for many human populations, and which are especially relevant for Indigenous people. These include regular and routinized practices like hunting, harvesting, and land-based ceremonies that ontologically bridge Indigenous health, language, food, and knowledge (Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019; Yumagulova et al., 2023). Indigenous, land-based worldviews offer a way to better understand the nuances of climate im/mobility—one that neither privileges climate determinism nor abstracts climate from im/mobility trajectories or experiences. Instead, it centers relationships to land as a reciprocal space of interaction that is made and remade through im/mobility practices (Atleo & Boron, 2022). This approach better exposes how im/mobility is determined, shaped, and structured by “contingent subjects, enacted contexts, and fleeting moments of practice and political engagement” (Sheller, 2018, p. 21).

Much of the broader literature on climate-induced im/mobility stems from Western empirical case studies (Ballantyne, 2018), where human and nature exist in an ontologically hierarchical relationship (Cronon, 1996), where capitalist, colonial, and imperial systems are

centered as key im/mobility influences (Obokata et al., 2014). The studies that foreground Indigenous im/mobility often rely on this ontological separation, adopting economic models that assess rural-urban migration trends (Hofstede et al., 2023; Howard & Lobo, 2013; Toivanen, 2022). These studies impose a Western approach and framework to assess Indigenous experiences, limiting the culturally relevant insights that can be gained. Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) scholars have long-challenged Western worldviews and classifications that separate humans and the land (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016; Cronon, 1996; Tynan, 2021; Vannini & Vannini, 2019; Wildcat et al., 2014; Woodworth et al., 2025; Yumagulova et al., 2023). These studies have exposed alternative ways of understanding the human-nature relationship, reframing how people make sense of time and place, including during im/mobility. As such, addressing im/mobility through a relational framework rooted in Indigenous perspectives may expose new culturally grounded pathways for im/mobility-related governance, policy, and humanitarian responses (Baldwin et al., 2014; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019; Thornton et al., 2023).

For many Indigenous communities, the land is central to life, encompassing not only the physical geography but the underlying ontological principles that shape Indigenous worldviews (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Styres, 2019; Watts, 2013). Indigenous im/mobility practices are rooted in land-based frameworks and are deeply tied to identity, sovereignty, and cultural continuity (Whyte et al., 2019). They are, in other words, expressions of Indigenous grounding in ancestral, physical, cultural, spiritual, and emotional traditions, which centrally feature ethical responsibilities held towards the land (Carpio et al., 2022; Suliman et al., 2019; Tabe, 2019). Indigenous im/mobility is a lived-response and practice to these relationships and responsibilities (Wiegel et al., 2019).

Farbotko (2022), for example, shows how Indigenous People in the Pacific are resisting climate-displacement narratives by asserting sovereignty and reclaiming their relationships to land through staying in place. This work on Oceania cosmologies grounds immobility as an “active, decolonial remaking and reclaiming of what mobility, home, and place” mean (Farbotko, 2022, p. 3394). Similarly, Turner and Clifton (2009) document how the Gitga’at Nation uses intergenerational spiritual and cosmological knowledge to sustain culturally and territorially-informed im/mobility. This further shows that im/mobility is more than just a response to altering climatic and land-conditions; it constitutes a form of land-based knowledge and presence, thereby inserting Indigenous political and cultural life into im/mobility (Bräuchler & Ménard, 2017; Ochoa Espejo, 2020; Prout Quicke & Green, 2018). In this light, relational approaches help expose the “ongoing, changing, yet also eternal mutual custodianship of life with ancestors and descendants” as foundational to Indigenous im/mobility (Suliman et al., 2019, p. 314). It provides an entry point to explore how human movement is connected to place, kinship, and governance through relationships to land, history, and responsibility.

To meaningfully explore relational approaches, we turn to berry harvesting, a vital practice shaped by the land (including climate change), culture, language, and socio-economic precarity (Boulanger-Lapointe et al., 2019; Parlee et al., 2005). Berry harvest—including the collection of raspberries, blueberries, saskatoon berries, strawberries, soap berries, cranberries, gooseberries, and cloudberry—enables the transfer of Indigenous Knowledge and teachings (Kimmerer, 2013; Parlee et al., 2005), specifically centered around subsistence (Boulanger-Lapointe et al., 2019, 2020), environmental stewardship (Boulanger-Lapointe et al., 2020; Mucioki, 2024) and health (Flint et al., 2011; Hupp et al., 2015). As such, berry harvesting offers a grounded way to explore how climate im/mobility is tied to ongoing and embodied relationships in time and place.

Methodology

This study is influenced by Wilson's (2008) Indigenous methodology, relational accountability. Indigenous research paradigms offer a framework that is rooted in Indigenous thought, theory, worldviews, and axiology (Hart, 2010; Kovach, 2009; Stronach & Adair, 2014). Furthermore, they offer ontological and epistemological guidance focused on Indigenous relations to land (including water and sky), the spirit world, and the temporal past, present, and future (Ljubicic et al., 2022; Watts, 2013; Wilson, 2008). In this context, the research is guided by “good” relations among researchers, participants, and the collective sum of all our relations (Wilson, 2008). Through these relations, knowledge is exposed, shared, and reflected upon (Wilson, 2008).

Relational accountability prioritizes the collective, reciprocal responsibility among all relational entities connected to the study (Ljubicic et al., 2022; Reo, 2019; Wilson, 2008). It forefronts honest, collaborative, and reflective research approaches that acknowledge each relationship, including among humans, non-humans, and knowledge (Wilson, 2008). Enacting relational accountability can help ensure that the research process is further decolonized by prioritizing responsible, respectful, reciprocal, and relevant relationships (Brunette-Debassige & Wakeham, 2020; Igwe et al., 2022; Menzies, 2001). In practice, the commitment to maintaining relational accountability manifests through the collaborative development, performance, interpretation, and publication of research outputs through ongoing dialogue, community feasts, gatherings, and art.

This research draws on empirical data collected between August 2022 and April 2024. The dataset comprises detailed fieldnotes, regular seasonal visits to the community, and an immersive six-month field experience where the principal researcher lived in Tthets'éhkédélj. It is comprised of 17 semi-structured interviews with 23 participants; several interviews explicitly asked about

berry picking, while others discussed im/mobility more broadly. As pre-determined by the research partnership between the researchers and Tłtsh'Éhkédélj First Nation, the interview recordings and transcripts remain the property of the First Nation, ensuring community ownership and control over the data and outputs. As such, this article has been reviewed and approved by the Nation.

The research population consisted of Tłtsh'Éhkédélj residents. The sample included individuals over the age of 18 who provided informed consent to participate in the study. The process of informed consent was heavily prioritized; potential participants were invited to participate in the study, often at their residences, where they were offered verbal and printed copies of the approved research ethics board consent forms, a draft interview guide, and a plain-language summary of the research objectives. Participants were given several days to review and amend the documents before deciding whether to participate, without any social pressures or the influence of the principal researcher present. This process ensured informed consent by making participants aware of the questions they would be asked and how their responses would be utilized to address the research question and objectives (Bhutta, 2004). Additionally, interviewees had the option to choose whether to be quoted or paraphrased and whether to be identified by name in the research outputs. Some individuals expressed a desire to have their names associated with their words, while others preferred to remain anonymous; thus, some participants are identified by name in the following sections while others are referred to as “community member”.

After a few days, participants were re-engaged, and if they wished to participate, the interview date, time, and location were determined. Participants had the choice of whether their interview would be conducted individually or in a group, based on their comfort levels. This process empowered the participants to shape the interviews, thereby helping to balance power dynamics throughout the interview process (Manzo & Brightbill, 2007).

Interviews were conducted in different locations in the community, including participant's homes, the band office, and on the land. The choices of interview locations varied, based on the time of year, topics to be discussed, and relational accountability maintained by the participants and the researchers. For example, interviews focused on the importance of the river occurred at the riverbank, while discussions about on-the-land camps occurred at the respective camps. This approach helped integrate and blur the distinctions between land, time, space, and knowledge in the interview discussions, enriching depth and relational accountability to the interviews (Kovach, 2021a; Wilson, 2008).

The relationships sustained between the principal researcher and the participants, as well as the principal researcher's reflexive research journal, significantly informed the interviews. While several recurring themes guided each interview—such as participants' relationships to im/mobility, the land, Dene culture, structural disruptions that influence these relationships, and the different methods participants employ to navigate these disruptions—each participant was asked questions tailored to their unique lived experiences and the relationship they maintained with the principal researcher. This approach ensured that interviews were grounded in existing relationships, thereby encapsulating a broader relational context. For example, community members who had previously shared their experiences with berry harvest were asked more specific questions related to this activity, whereas participants who had previously shared their physical limitations were asked about their challenges accessing the land.

The interviews lasted between 40 and 120 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Copies of the transcripts were sent back to each participant to review before we began our thematic analysis; none requested clarification or edits. Interviewees received financial compensation, tobacco, and a small challah (bread from the lead authors culture) in gratitude.

We applied a thematic approach to analyze the data, which is useful for identifying common themes and ideas within a data set (Kovach, 2021b; Lee et al., 2018). Despite critiques that suggest thematic analyses can isolate particular quotes and ideas from the larger context in which they were shared (Kovach, 2021b), it remains an effective approach for identifying, analyzing, and representing overarching themes, recurring concepts, and contradictions within the data (Efimoff, 2022). We drew on Kovach's (2021) six-step process for thematic analysis, which involves (1) identifying our theoretical underpinnings, (2) immersing ourselves in the data, (3) recognizing recurrent themes and (4) contradictory statements, (5) building connections between the themes and contradictions, and (6) presenting an overview of the themes back to community members, the final step occurring in March 2024.

Based on Kovach's (2021) process and the objectives of this research, we organized this paper around the influence of climate and environmental change on TFN im/mobility with a specific focus on berry harvesting. While several key structural influences emerged from the data, including climatic and environmental changes, culture, colonialism, and capitalism, we limit the discussion to climatic and environmental changes as they are deeply connected to ongoing histories of colonialism and capitalism in the Canadian North (Baldwin et al., 2011; Coulthard, 2014; Parson & Ray, 2018). In the next section, we illustrate the influence of climatic and environmental changes on Indigenous im/mobilities and then situate our findings in a broader discussion before concluding the article.

The Berry Harvest

Berry harvesting is a form of land-based im/mobility, shaped not only by physical access but also by memory, including Traditional Knowledge. A community member explained that Elders spoke

about a time when Tthets'ėhkédélį was a small site where families gathered to harvest food, emphasizing the historical importance of berries and wild game (March 20, 2024). Harvesting off the land offered all the nutrition that the Tthets'ėhkédélį Got'ie needed (community member, March 20, 2024). Margaret elaborates:

Berries were a very, very important food source. And I remember whatever berries were in season, all the women and their children would go and pick berries. We go for high-bush cranberries, saskatoons and blueberries and raspberries and strawberries. (April 4, 2024)

Berry picking remains an essential activity through which community members can connect with the land, obtain vital nutrients, and transmit Traditional Knowledge (Connie, May 16, 2023; Donna, May 31, 2023).

Cathy recalls walking the trail to mįh enįaets'ehgo (where the fish nets are pushed away from the shore, a local swimming and picnic spot), describing the memory of looking in specific places on and off the trail for “saskatoon berries, cranberries, rosehips, and blueberries” (May 19, 2023). Connie shares:

Well, we would pick the berries close to Jackfish Creek. I took [some of the Elders]. We called [the area] blueberry lane. We were just picking berries. I made sure to check on [the Elders] and they were ok, they were sitting there picking berries. They didn't have to move, there were so many berries. (May 16, 2023)

Aside from “blueberry lane,” berries could be found all over Tthets’éhkédélj. Cranberries, raspberries, strawberries, cloudberrries, and saskatoon berries could be harvested by the airport, people’s homes, and in the bush (community member, March 20, 2024; Connie, May 16, 2023; Joanne, May 19, 2023).

A community member shared that they would always watch their parents pay the land with tobacco before harvesting berries and that they have since adopted the same practice (June 8, 2023). Paying the land is part of a reciprocal process through which respect for the land and the self, including ancestral and spatial relations, is simultaneously sought and practiced (a community member, June 8, 2023). This results in a culturally informed im/mobility practice.

Reflections on berry harvest not only encapsulate subsistence needs but also a reciprocal embodied knowledge of the land. Victoria shares a reflection on berry harvesting with an Elder, during which she learned how to access fresh drinking water, a resource vital for survival:

I remember that first time we went, and I was so thirsty, I told [the Elder with me]. And she just stopped, she had a little tin cup, and she just started digging in the moss and digging in the moss and [...] all of a sudden, this water started coming up...and she strained the water. It was the coldest water ever. (May 8, 2023)

Cathy similarly recalls that the muskeg used to be “waist deep” in water, providing readily accessible drinking water (May 19, 2023). These stories illustrate how berry harvest enables youth and community members to attune to the land, revealing Traditional Knowledge embedded in the land and the practice of harvesting.

This intimate connection with the land through berry harvest also extends to wildlife. Like Tłtsh'Éhkédélj Got'ie, animals, such as grouse, bears, rabbits, and moose, depend on berries for survival. Knowing this, snare lines would traditionally be set across berry patches where wildlife frequently visited (community member, May 8, 2023) and hunters would frequent the muskegs where animals could be found eating the berries (Angus, May 19, 2023). In other words, knowing where the berries grew helped people understand animal behaviour (community member, May 31, 2023), further confirming the relationships between the land, food, animal movements, cultural practices, and hunting and harvesting practices.

Victoria shares “that when we were young, we spent a lot of time on the land, we’d go with my grandma and we’d walk for miles, just picking berries or medicines” (May 8, 2023). Another community member explained that when they were younger, their mother would carry them in a baby belt as she walked out on the land to harvest berries (March 20, 2023). Their reflections highlight the importance of learning essential land-based survival skills at a young age, emphasizing that the berry harvest is deeply rooted in kinship, caretaking, memory, and Traditional Knowledge (Kimmerer, 2013). The act of berry harvesting serves as a vital educational experience, fostering the intergenerational transfer of knowledge as youth and community members can learn harvesting times, locations, and practices from Elders (community member, June 8, 2023).

Shifting ecological patterns are disrupting these relational geographies, making access to these once-reliable patches more complex and less predictable (Donna, May 31, 2023), leading to fewer people participating in harvesting berries (Angus, May 19, 2023). The climate “is really changing, quickly” (Donna, May 31, 2023), particularly in Tłtsh'Éhkédélj, where the increasing frequency and intensity of floods, wildfires, and drought disrupt residents’ connection to the land and availability of food resources (community member, May 31, 2023; Connie, May 16, 2023).

In spring 2020, an ice jam on the river caused massive flooding in Tthets'éhkédélj (Morritt-Jacobs, 2020). A community member explains, “We used to go [cranberry picking] up at the airport...and now, no one touches [those patches] because of [the spilled] fuel...all the insulation from homes [and] furniture” that washed over the berry patches (community member, May 31, 2023). Although “much of the contaminated soil was dug up and removed from the community,” residents remain anxious about the health impacts caused by harvesting foods grown in contaminated soil (Donna, May 31, 2023).

In recent summers (2014, 2022, and 2023) wildfires near Tthets'éhkédélj caused significant harm to the land (community member, May 31, 2023). “The wind is getting more aggressive” (community member, May 31, 2023), causing fires to “roll” across the landscape, becoming more intense and frequent (Rufus, May 19, 2024). These fires “destroyed trails” that guided community members across the land, linking them to berry patches and traditional camps (Anthony, June 10, 2023). Stan explains that the trails were more than just tools for navigating the land, “they marked where [our ancestors] have been, and where we should be going,” encompassing both traditional knowledge and ancestral connections (June 6, 2023).

In addition to these rapid-onset environmental changes, residents also report the ongoing impacts of a prolonged drought (Stan, June 6, 2023; community member, May 31, 2023; community member, March 20, 2024). “The days are getting hotter” (community member, March 20, 2024) and there is simply “not enough rain,” causing the berries to “dry up” (Angus, May 19, 2023). Traditionally fruitful locations such as the muskeg (Medina, June 8, 2023), riverbanks and creeks (Jonas, June 9, 2023), and areas deep in the forest (community member, May 31, 2023; Donna, May 31, 2023) have shown an increase in dryness and a decline in berry production. These changes directly impact Tthets'éhkédélj im/mobility, as fewer and fewer people are going out

harvesting, thereby spending less time out on and connecting with the land and engaging with traditional practices (community member, May 31, 2023; Donna, May 31, 2023). As a result, more people are heading to grocery stores to buy their food and ensure they are food secure (Anthony, June 10th, 2023). Anthony explains that shopping in a store lacks important experiential values associated with knowledge, culture, and identity, “I hate [it],” he says (June 10th, 2023). Another community member noted that being on the land harvesting provides a unique and deep connection, filled with knowledge and love, which is diminished when you rely on a car and grocery stores for subsistence (March 20, 2024).

Yet, berry harvesting remains a present-day practice, sustaining relationships to people and the land. Residents continue to go out on the land, actively hunting and harvesting. A community member explains the importance of this continued im/mobility:

I’d rather [be in the bush with my nephew so] he can actually see what we do ... By us bringing him out there every now and then, it doesn’t have to be every day, but then he’ll eventually catch on and his skills will develop in time, just like I did ... In our Dene ways, there’s one rule that says, “share as much as possible” and in our culture we like to share [what and how we harvest]. All that stuff is taught through being on the land and doing what we were doing back in the day. (March 20, 2024)

“We still go berry picking,” Donna shares (May 31, 2023), “we just don’t get as much as we used to”. Historically, berry patches have flourished in both open and hidden locations throughout the unburnt bush (community member, May 31, 2023). “Now,” Donna explains, “[when we go harvesting,] we go out on the land that way...away from the community” (May 31,

2023). Residents have altered their harvesting patterns and locations to accommodate the burn sites. Moreover, with the rising gas prices and the increasing unpredictability of the land, it has become more costly to venture out in hopes of getting “lucky” and finding harvestable berry patches (community member, May 31, 2023; Connie, May 16, 2023). The process of finding a berry patch is a relational practice that requires time, memory, shared knowledge, and attention to the more-than-human (Donna, May 31, 2023) as you weave your way through the bush (community member, May 19, 2023). Consequentially, only those with sufficient access to gas money, time, motorized vehicles (community member, June 8, 2023), and sufficient physical fitness to duck under, climb over, and dodge the brush and burnt trees in the bush (community member, May 19, 2023), can participate in harvesting food from the land (Anthony, June 10, 2023).

Berry Harvest and Im/mobility

Berry harvesting is a vital im/mobility practice for the Tł̥ets'ėhkédélj Got'ie. It not only provides essential subsistence nutrients, but it is also rooted in Traditional Knowledge and offers the harvester a deep connection to the land, sustaining relations of care, knowledge, and well-being. Reflections shared by participants reveal insights into survival skills, land stewardship, wildlife patterns, and reciprocal human-land relationships that are integral to harvesting, further showing how land-based practices blur boundaries between land, climate, culture, and economy. However, a range of factors—including climatic and environmental changes, rising fuel costs, and physical accessibility—are converging to make the berry harvest increasingly inaccessible. These factors collectively reshape the ways that community members move through, conceptualize, and learn from the land through their im/mobility.

Relational thinking broadens the debate on the human-nature relationship in the context of climate induced im/mobility. That is, it views climate change as an ongoing relational process rooted in time, place, and responsibility to the more-than-human world (Chanteloup et al., 2018). This offers an ontological contrast to Western debates that typically separate humans from nature to evaluate the external influence of climate and environmental changes on im/mobility practices. It offers a nuanced perspective on im/mobility by showing how movement and stasis through time and space are indicative of evolving relationships rather than responsive forms of adaptation, resistance, or resilience (Farbotko, 2022; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019; Yumagulova et al., 2023). This is significant for conceptualizing Indigenous im/mobility as it links to other research that suggest “maintaining cultural and livelihood links to land” are central to culturally relevant im/mobility decisions (Perumal, 2018, p. 59). Such a reconceptualization refuses climate victimhood (Farbotko, 2018; Simpson, 2017) and reasserts land-based relations, power, and agency into the im/mobile, Indigenous body (Blondin, 2021). In this light, im/mobility is neither determined by social relations nor by the biophysical environment, but from an inseparable relational entanglement.

At a broader policy level, relational thinking reorients how we conceptualize the politics of movement across scales—local, national, and international. Western governance often tends to overlook Indigenous relationality to land, particularly in the context of climate influenced im/mobility, to evaluate climate im/mobility in the context of threat (Bro et al., 2024; Steimanis et al., 2021). Such framing produces policy decisions and programs that tend to privilege either migration or non-migration trajectories, reinforcing binary outcomes and meanings to understand the influence of climate change on human movement through time and space (Farbotko, 2018). Yet, practices like berry picking illustrate how subtle changes in the land reverberate through social

and systemic relations influencing both mobility and immobility trajectories. This offers an embodied understanding of im/mobility—one that reflects lived and practiced relationships with climate change. From this perspective, climate change is not detached from im/mobility itself, it is an integral part.

On the ground, however, berry harvesting continues despite the disruptions caused by climate and environmental changes. The stories shared of harvesting reflect adaptability and resilience in the context of land-based relationships and im/mobility (Chanteloup et al., 2018). Community members continue to find ways to sustain the reciprocal relationships that have endured through generations, underscoring the nutritional, cultural, and reciprocal value of berry harvesting (Kimmerer, 2013). This, in turn, enables what Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar, musician, and activity Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) calls “land as pedagogy,” where knowledge is co-created by experience, relationships, and responsibility to the land (p. 151). Through this lens, the ongoing act of going on the land and harvesting berries is a way of embodying ancestral and present-day relations and asserting Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty over changing landscapes (Boulanger-Lapointe et al., 2019; Kimmerer, 2013; Parlee et al., 2005).

Taken together, this perspective reveals how relational approaches offer a wholistic perspective to characterizing the role of climate change on im/mobility patterns (Cooke & Bélanger, 2006). This reflects recent claims that im/mobility is bound to ongoing processes of moving, staying, adapting, and evolving forms of resilience that have sustained communities and practices for generations (Farbotko, 2022; Simpson, 2017). Moreover, it is better suited to conceptualize Indigenous experiences and im/mobility dynamics (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020).

Conclusion

A relational lens shows how movements are shaped by the land, Traditional Knowledge systems, cultural beliefs and practices, and interdependent ecological relationships (Erger et al., 2022). In the present day, the ongoing act of locating berries for harvesting weaves together movement, care, knowledge, time, and the land (Kimmerer, 2013), illustrating how everyday practices actively shape and are shaped by im/mobility. This relational conceptual approach shows that climate change is not an external variable that can be weighed against others, but an integral element of a relational web that shapes life, including why, when, and how people choose to move or stay (Taylor, 2013). This offers a more just and contextually grounded framework for understanding the role of climate change in influencing im/mobility, particularly among land-based cultures.

This paper re-examines the maximalist-minimalist debate through an Indigenous im/mobility lens—one grounded in Indigenous relationships with the land, climate, and culture. Rather than viewing movement as a response to climate hazards or social structures, this approach emphasizes that decisions to move are shaped by enduring connections to place, ancestral knowledge, and reciprocal responsibilities to the more-than-human world. In this way, im/mobility is not an outcome of external pressures, but an embodied relational practice that needs to be understood through ongoing and evolving human-land relationships (Farbotko, 2018; Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019).

By centering relationality, this perspective highlights how Indigenous Peoples are actively managing climate risks while sustaining knowledge, identity, and cultural continuity (Farbotko, 2022; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019). Though grounded in TFN experiences, the insights here may resonate with Indigenous communities globally. Land-based practices like berry harvesting

illustrate how im/mobility can be a form of adaptation, resistance, and cultural resurgence, and not just a means of escaping hazardous situations. Future research can explore how this reframing is embedded in ties to land, culture, kin, and identity.

A relational approach also highlights what it means to move through time and space, challenging Western binaries of displacement and emplacement. For policymakers, this approach encourages the decolonization of Western perspectives on the climate crisis. That is, it calls for policies that support sovereign, place-based decision making that account for Traditional Knowledge, cultural practices, and Indigenous governance. In doing so, this paper supports ongoing scholarly calls to decolonize the climate im/mobility discourse (Boas et al., 2022; Sheller, 2018) and prioritize Indigenous thought, responsibility, and continuity.

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Figure 15: The Fruitful Forest, by Sophie Rivers

Chapter 5: Indigenous im/mobility: Sovereignty, pedagogy, and resistance

By: Brandon Pludwinski, Tłtsh'Éhkédélı First Nation, Margaret Ireland, Alex Latta, Julia Gyapay, Sonia Wesche & Christine Gibb

Abstract

As settler colonial pressures continue to affect North American Indigenous cultural, spatial, temporal, and land-based practices, Indigenous communities continue to resist some pressures while adapting to others. These acts, which are typically overlooked in the im/mobility literature, are not only acts of resistance but also key expressions of survivance, pedagogy, and self-determination. Using a relational approach, this study explores how Tłtsh'Éhkédélı community members enact im/mobility as a culturally grounded practice that negotiates colonial policy—including residential and day schools—while centering Dene laws and relationships. Based on 17 interviews with 23 participants, we advance discussion on Indigenous im/mobility by showing how sovereignty and resistance are contextualized through embodied assertions of land relations, knowledge, and identity across time and space. The findings highlight im/mobility as a politically charged pedagogy that illuminates how federal day and public-school policies exert control over Indigenous lands and bodies.

Key Words: Tłtsh'Éhkédélı First Nation; Im/mobility; Sovereignty, Pedagogy, Resistance

Introduction

Movement across time and space has been a foundational tool through which Indigenous Peoples have, and continue to sustain relationships with the land, one another, and culture (Whyte et al., 2019). This movement is not always linear; it involves both prolonged and rapid moments

of pause and/or stillness that co-constitute how mobility and immobility are experienced (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020). Scholars refer to this dynamic interplay as “im/mobility” (Bräuchler & Ménard, 2017), a concept used to explore the “political boundaries and identities” shaped by “embedded regulations, legal and judicial systems, bureaucracies, and social practices” sustained by movement and stasis through time and space (Sheller, 2018a, p. 33).

For many Indigenous Peoples around the world, the sovereign rights to move and stay have been profoundly colonized (Suliman et al., 2019). Through state-led policies and interventions such as forced schooling (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012; Mountain, 2019), forced relocation (Healey, 2016; Tester, 1994; Walls & Whitbeck, 2012), and anthropogenic environmental disruption (Marino, 2012; Tabe, 2019), colonial governments have sought to control Indigenous bodies, lands, and resources (B. Braun, 2002; Lawrence, 2012; Luby, 2020). These policies and laws, including the Indian Act and settlement pressures, have been met with ongoing resistance (Coulthard, 2014), wherein voluntary im/mobility functions as a strategy to “strengthen cultural and spiritual agency” amid regulatory and settler pressures (Farbotko, 2018, p. 82). This resistance is critical—it reframes Indigenous Peoples not as passive victims of colonial domination, but as active agents engaged in the ongoing work for refusal, resurgence, and relational continuity through im/mobility (Farbotko, 2022; Kitara et al., 2024; A. Simpson, 2017; L. B. Simpson, 2017).

The Dene of Denendeh (otherwise known as the Northwest Territories, Canada) demonstrate many examples of im/mobility as both a form of “complicit” acceptance and strategic rejection of colonial rule (Walsh, 2022, p. 53). Specifically, the Dene of Tłtsh’édélı́ (translated to the place downriver of McGill Lake) have long histories navigating the layered tensions of movement, settlement, resistance, and acceptance. The purpose of this article is to explore how im/mobility functions as an embodied pedagogy—the integration of education within

practice—to sustain reciprocal relationships between humans and non-humans, a core philosophical tenet of Indigenous worldviews. Understanding these dynamics will show how im/mobility is a deeply politicized, relational, land-based practice that is embedded in broader assertions of land relations, knowledge, and identity. To do so, we take up the specific histories and experiences related to the federal day school, now public school, that has operated in the community since 1952.

This paper continues with a brief description of Tłtshets'éhk'édélı́ to situate the study. It then grounds the paper with an overview of the relevant literature and our methodological approach. We then proceed with a discussion of our findings and an analysis to better understand the role of im/mobility as a response to ongoing settler-colonialism.

Research Context

Tłtshets'éhk'édélı́ (Figure 15) is a Dene community, whose ancestral connections to their present territory trace back to time immemorial. These ancestral lands came under the settler gaze following the discovery of oil in Tłęgqłhı́ (now known as the Town of Norman Wells) in the 1920s (Fumoleau, 2004). In response, the Canadian government acted swiftly to secure land and development rights, culminating in the signing of Treaty 11 in July 1922 (Fumoleau, 2004). Although the treaty affirmed that each community would hold authority over education, control was forcefully taken and centralized by the colonial state (Fumoleau, 2004).

Following the provisions outlined by the Indian Act (1876), children were legally removed from their homes and enrolled in church-run education institutions, otherwise known as Indian Residential Schools (IRS) (Thielen-Wilson, 2014).

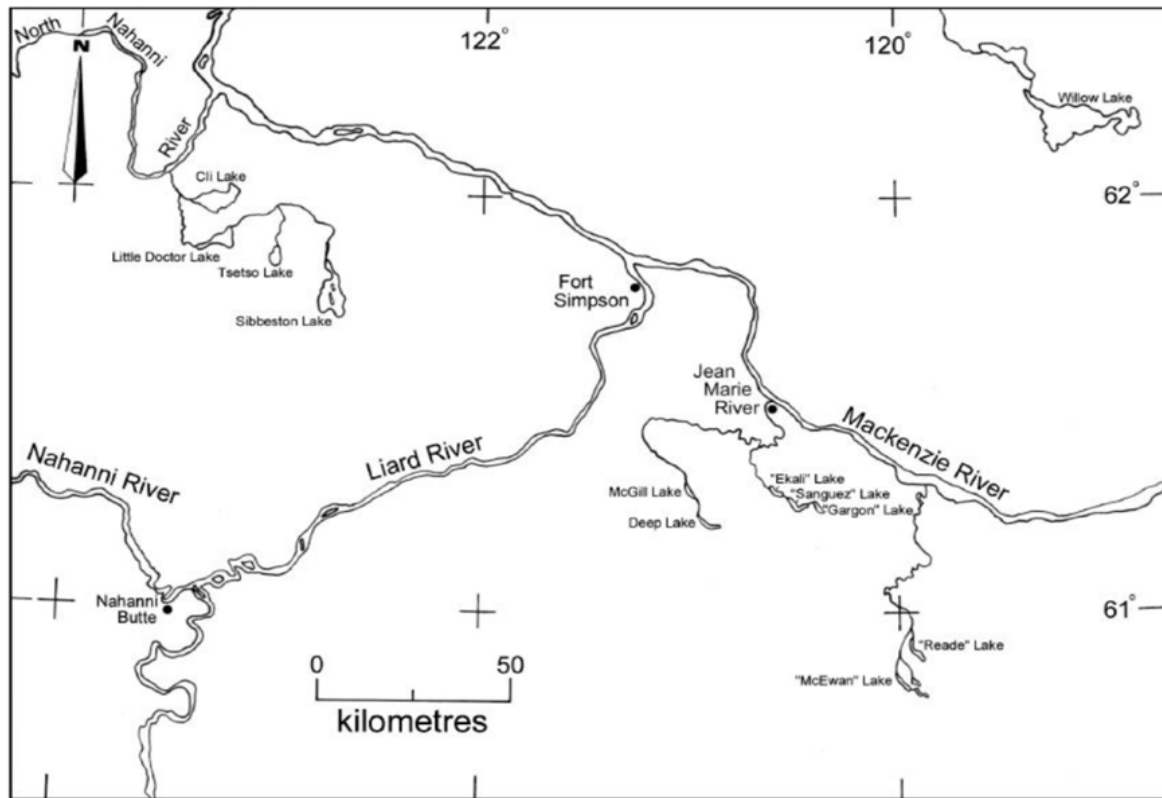


Figure 16: Map of Jean Marie River (Stewart et al., 2003).

By 1920, the people of Tthets'ėhk'édėłı had settled in the community's current location and became more vulnerable to increasing coercion to send their children to the IRS in Łı́ıdlıı Kúé (Fort Simpson). The Tthets'ėhk'édėłı Got'ie organized and were able to take action to keep their children from the residential school system. In 1954, the community opened a local schoolhouse, a deliberate strategy to resist the displacement of their youngest. Then-Chief Louie Norwegian led negotiations with federal agents, advocating for the right to educate their children in their home community (Helm, 1961; Morritt-Jacobs, 2020). Eventually, an agreement was reached: the

community would be allowed to build a school, employ federally appointed teachers, and keep their children—as young as five years old—at home (Morritt-Jacobs, 2020; Winkler, 2015). When youth reached approximately 11 years old, they were sent to Lapointe Hall, a Catholic Residential School in Łíídlı́ Kúé. By this age, some of the youth had a grounding in their Dene culture (Morritt-Jacobs, 2020), which would later be threatened by Western-Catholic worldviews that were imposed by the residential school system (Mountain, 2019; B. Young, 2015).

The negotiations of im/mobility control among the First Nation and colonial government offer a fascinating case study. The Tłı̨tsh'édélı́ Got'ie demonstrate both acceptance and resistance through im/mobility: while community members were forced to comply with federal schooling mandates, they simultaneously exercised self-determination by limiting the age at which their children would leave home. This example underscores how im/mobility is central to both colonial projects and self-determination strategies.

The Colonial State, Sovereignty, and Indigenous Im/mobility

The Indian Act (1876) functioned to legitimize the Canadian government in their efforts to define and exert control over Indigenous Peoples and lands (Collis, 2022). Its provisions—transforming land into property (Atleo & Boron, 2022), the creation of spatially-bound communities or reserves aimed to divide nations and people (Lawrence, 2012; L. B. Simpson, 2017), and the forced enrollment of young people into the Western school system (Feir, 2016)—directly constrained Indigenous im/mobility, disrupting seasonal harvesting patterns and fractured the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. These mechanisms were part of the larger colonial project, aimed to “eliminate” Indigenous Peoples, including their cultures, relationships to land, and ways of knowing (Wolfe, 2006, p. 387).

Later, in 1921-1922, the signing of Treaty 11 brought “small mobile [Indigenous] groups” together (Helm et al., 2000, p. 3) to negotiate rights with the settler government (Fumoleau, 2004). In practice, the treaty functioned to consolidate the Dene into defined areas, regulate where they could hunt and harvest, and facilitate settler access to lands and resources (Coulthard, 2014). These legal and spatial constraints undermined control and the ability to exercise autonomy over traditional territories (Lawrence, 2012). Ultimately, as colonial official J. A. J. McKenna (1899) explained, the treaty was designed to make it “easier for the Government to control” Indigenous Peoples, outlining crown lands, reserve lands, hunting and harvesting rights, and annuities (cited by Fumoleau, 2004, p. 54). The exercise of power by the settler state through the treaty process and subsequent land and resource decisions was documented by Catholic Priest Father Fumoleau, who explained that lands once sustaining Indigenous hunting and harvesting practices were forcefully redefined and reallocated to the settler government to “safeguard” Indigenous occupancy (2004, p. 304) and facilitate resource development (Harris, 2004). The cumulative effect was the regulation of Indigenous im/mobility to serve the economic and political interests of the settler nation-state. The provisions outlined in the agreement were later “broken, forgotten and finally disavowed,” causing hardship and economic and subsistence disaster for Indigenous Peoples (Fumoleau, 2004, p. xxvii).

The IRS system must also be considered a part of the colonial strategy aimed at controlling Indigenous life through im/mobility. It has been argued that the IRS can be best understood through the lens of genocide (Fontaine, 2017; MacDonald & Hudson, 2012; Mountain, 2019; B. Young, 2015), coinciding with claims of attempted “cultural annihilation, ethnic cleansing, or forced assimilation” (Thielen-Wilson, 2014, p. 182). The IRS attempted to erase the “embodied, practiced, and legal-governance aspects of Indigenous ontologies as they are enacted by

Indigenous actors” (Todd, 2016, p. 17, original emphasis). This includes disrupting “spatiotemporal dynamics that are key for the dynamic constructions of place,” such as im/mobility, that sustain Indigenous cultures, worldviews, and political structures (Salazar & González, 2021, p. 2). This occurred through “imposed colonial Eurocentric standards” of day-schooling that saw the removal of “children from culturally appropriate educational institutions and, in doing so, reduced the time they have available to learn and practice [land-based relationships]” (Ferguson et al., 2022, p. 26).

Despite the enduring pressures of the colonial state, Indigenous Peoples and communities have remained “committed to [their own] jurisdiction” (A. Simpson, 2017, p. 20). Audra Simpson describes this commitment as “refusal” (2007)—a willful disengagement from colonial confinements and an assertion of identity, rights, and presence on Indigenous terms, including non-Indigenous education. This refusal appears in political and social spheres, as well as in education practices that sustain Indigenous lifeways and knowledge systems. Sandy Grande (2004), a Quechua scholar, outlines “Red Pedagogy,” a pedagogical approach that “not only helps sustain the lifeways of Indigenous peoples but also provides an explanatory framework that helps us understand the complex and intersecting vectors of power shaping the historical-material conditions of Indigenous [sovereignty]” (p. 32). It aligns with calls for education that reinforce and instill distinctly Indigenous worldviews, values, and knowledge (Grande, 2004; Wildcat et al., 2014). Similarly, autonomous exercise of im/mobility decisions and practices is one of those willful disengagements of refusal, enacted on the land and through culturally relevant learning opportunities, where Indigenous Peoples can assert agency over movement and education (L. B. Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019).

Indigenous scholars agree that Indigenous im/mobility is rooted in ongoing reciprocal relationships, culture, time, space, and land (L. B. Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019). Indigenous knowledge tells of “intellectual [and cultural] traditions and histories” that “explicitly feature constant motion (or mobility) as a theme” (Whyte et al., 2019, p. 321). As L. B. Simpson (2017) explains, “[Anishinaabe People have] always moved throughout our territories and through the territories of others with the practice of diplomacy, moving with the consent of other nations” (p. 197).

Indigenous cultures, languages, stories, and knowledge systems are fundamentally rooted in im/mobility practices through which knowledge is both obtained and continually shared (Noodin, 2017; Ochoa Espejo, 2020; Salazar & González, 2021). This rejects the misconception of “rootless” or “aimless” Indigenous im/mobility practices (Konishi, 2018, p. 35) and exposes the “constellations of actors, actions, [and] meanings,” or relationships, that influence im/mobility practices and trajectories (Sheller, 2018a, p. 11). Accordingly, relationships are at the foundation of Indigenous im/mobility (L. B. Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019). As Beaver Hills and Papaschase Cree scholar Dwayne Donald (2021) explains,

It became a personal life goal for me to be recognized as a relative of the place where my ancestral roots are quite deep. I began regularly walking alongside the North Saskatchewan River to facilitate this. As I walked, I began weaving together wisdom teachings, oral histories and written accounts until a unified story emerged that expressed how I understood myself in relation to the place I call home. (p. 61)

Donald demonstrates how access to land and sovereignty over im/mobility are essential for fostering deeply rooted relationships with Indigenous lands, culture, knowledge, and identity. Walking involves a “process of knowledge production that facilitates [...] a common purpose both with place, with self, and with other beings” (Sletto et al., 2021, p. 612), including beings across spatial and temporal dimensions—past, present, and future (Sotelo, 2010). Within this context, walking exemplifies embodied relationality that both renews and reinforces connections to the land, culture, and self (Donald, 2021). These are the very embodiments and connections that colonial projects deliberately sought to sever in the name and benefit of the nation-state (Lawrence, 2012; McCormack, 2017). The logic behind the severance is that removing people from their ancestral lands will limit their relational and epistemic capacity to connect and engage with their land, culture, knowledge, and identity (Sletto et al., 2021). As such, walking is a practice rooted in Indigenous worldviews that actively resists the temporal and spatial limits imposed by centralized colonial and imperial projects (Standfield, 2018).

Dog teams, while a faster form of mobility than walking, also supported safe and relational im/mobility (Jarvenpa, 2024). Comprising 4 to 10 dogs, a team could pull sleighs over snow and ice (Hamilton, 2023), and were used across Turtle Island, enabling harvesters to access hunting and harvesting locations (Beaulieu, 2012). The dogs were active participants in land-based relationships that supported the wellbeing of humans and non-humans (Hamilton, 2023). For example, they would be fed fish from lakes, contributing to an ecological balance by regulating fish populations (Roberts, 2017) as the average five-dog team consumed approximately 1,360 fish annually (Helm et al., 2000). At night, dogs would alert harvesters to the presence of predators, such as wolves or bears, helping to ensure safety on the land (Hamilton, 2023; Roberts, 2017).

Beginning in the mid 20th century, many Indigenous Peoples and communities began to shift from dog teams to skidoos (Lévesque, 2011; Sacco, 2020). Skidoos provided a faster, more efficient, and more flexible form of winter travel. They allowed hunters to travel off-trail and cover greater distances to track large game with ease (Paul Dana et al., 2009). However, unlike dog teams, skidoos rely on purchased fuel, embedding this land-based practice within the wage economy (Sacco, 2020). Skidoos offered a tool through which hunting and harvesting could happen in shorter amounts of time, increasing the fluidity of life on the land with life at home, and increasing the social, political, economic, and cultural appeal of permanent settlement (Walsh, 2022). This fundamentally reshaped the ontological and spiritual dimension of movement on the land (Walsh, 2022).

Im/mobility, thus, can be conceptualized as both a condition produced by colonial violence (Toomey, 2022) and an assertion of sovereignty, pedagogy, and relationality (Whyte et al., 2019). It is a complex process that entangles ways of life, knowing, and relating to time and space (Sheller, 2018a). It can be controlled, asserted, negotiated, and ceded (Sheller, 2018a). Scholars have approached these complexities through what Sheller (2018a) calls “mobility justice.” Mobility justice, later expanded to im/mobility justice (Tschakert & Neef, 2022), “tracks the effects of inequalities in mobilities across various connected sites and scales [and] also shows how justice itself is a mobile assemblage of contingent subjects, enacted contexts, and fleeting moments of practice and political engagement” (Sheller, 2018a, p. 20). It explores the “modes of counter power and subversive mobilities” that “resist, overturn, challenge or escape” embodiments of im/mobility (Sheller, 2018b, p. 23). In doing so, these works highlight “the active remaking of culturally significant place,” all of which is temporally and spatially specific and bound to the socio-cultural systems and norms that govern it (Farbotko, 2022; Kitara et al., 2024). As such, a justice oriented

conceptual approach helps to redefine Indigenous peoples as sovereign political actors navigating their own im/mobility, rather than as passive victims of colonial policy (Yumagulova et al., 2023).

To truly understand and respect Indigenous communities and Peoples as sovereign, we must consider how im/mobility functions as a means of expressing and sustaining Indigeneity—particularly in the Canadian north. This study explores the complex, lived ways in which a northern Indigenous community continues to enact, negotiate, and protect its sovereign im/mobility. While scholars have previously theorized Indigenous im/mobility as a practice of refusal and resurgence (L. B. Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019), this paper offers empirical evidence to demonstrate how such practices enable Indigenous communities in the Canadian North to assert sovereignty and cultural continuity. Rooted in the notion of im/mobility justice, it grounds abstract notions of sovereignty over time, place, land, and Indigenous bodies by showing how decisions of where, when, and how to move or to stay, are tethered to Indigenous land-based pedagogies, agency, and resistance. In doing so, this paper reconceptualizes Indigenous im/mobility not only as a sign of sovereignty but as a mechanism for its ongoing enactment, negotiation, and transmission.

Relational Approach

This study is guided by Wilson's (2008) Indigenous research paradigm, relational accountability, which “reflects and builds upon the relationships between ideas and participants” (Wilson, 2008, p. 101). It embodies the voices and ideas authentic to both researchers and participants, grounded in shared understanding (Reo, 2019) and honours mutual obligations of respect and reciprocity (Wilson, 2008; Woodworth et al., 2025). Throughout the research process, long-standing relationships within the community and with the land shaped our activities, ensuring the research remained locally relevant, respectful, reciprocal, and responsible.

Building on decades of community-led climate change research driven by local Elders and land-users, this research similarly prioritizes community knowledge and leadership. Our process included several community- and land-based workshops, gatherings, and ceremonies, which continually centered the community's knowledge, participation, priorities, and cultural protocols. These gatherings also served as a space for continuous dialogue, feedback, and collective decision-making, allowing us to simultaneously conduct and refine the research. This paper is an outcome of our collaborative project with Tthets'éhk'édélı Got'ie—including Elders, adults (aged 30-60), and youth (aged 18-30)—and settler graduate students and university researchers.

This study is based on 17 semi-structured interviews with 23 participants and detailed notes from the principal researcher's field journal when they were living in the community from January 2023 – June 2023. Interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes, and were recorded, transcribed, and validated before entering our data set. Participants could choose to be referred to by name or remain anonymous, and to be directly quoted or paraphrased. Those who wished to remain anonymous are referred to as “community member” and those who wished to be paraphrased have not been quoted. Tthets'éhk'édélı First Nation, in accordance with community protocols and agreements, retains ownership of the transcripts and data, and this publication was approved by the community.

This research followed a rigorous ethical process emphasizing informed consent. At first, community members received a research information package that included the university approved REB forms, an accessible version of the research proposal to clarify the aims, objectives, and purpose of the research, a draft semi-structured interview guide, and a verbal overview of the research goals, processes, intended outcomes, REB forms, and our ethical approach. Recognizing that dialogue around colonial impacts can be sensitive, these materials helped participants

understand what their participation would entail and how we planned on using and sharing their knowledge and stories. Participants were given several days to review the research materials on their own, without external pressures of a researcher in the room, and decide if they want to participate. When participation was agreed upon, we set a time and location for the interview. Interviews took place in familiar and culturally significant settings, as determined by the participants—such as people’s homes, on the land, by riverbanks, at camps, or in the spaces between.

The interviews were intentionally designed to follow relational protocols, including flexible exchanges of stories, experiences, and knowledge through culturally appropriate practices and processes. The interviews were uniquely tailored based on existing relationships and shared knowledge, but consistently focused on participants’ memories of land, land use, and the impacts of climate change, work, and school on their im/mobility. This approach offered a well-rounded dataset that explores the relational nuances participants’ share with the land and im/mobility.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach to identify common themes, ideas, concepts, and relationships throughout the research (V. Braun & Clarke, 2023; Efimoff, 2022). We followed an approach offered by Kovach (2021), who articulates that thematic analyses “can be consistent with an Indigenous conceptual framing” as it “gives space, credence, and opportunity for Indigenous thinking and theory that is of relevance to Indigenous communities in specific ways” (p. 206). We employed a cyclical, ongoing six-step process that involved (1) grounding the work in an Indigenous theoretical framework, (2) coding the data, (3) exploring the relationships between codes, (4) revisiting the theoretical framework, (5) identifying themes from the codes, and (6) acknowledging the codes and statements that did not align with the others (Kovach, 2021). While we acknowledge the potential limitations of this analysis, namely the extraction of

statements and ideas from the dataset and the context in which they were shared (V. Braun & Clarke, 2023), we remained committed to grounding our analysis in ongoing dialogue with community partners and participants, ensuring the (re)presentation of data remained true to the experiences and meanings shared with us throughout the process.

Tthets'ėhk'édélį im/mobility and settler government schooling

This section traces Tthets'ėhk'édélį im/mobility and outlines how it was restructured by the settler institution of day school. It shows how despite this pressure, land-based, relational im/mobility persists. While we recognize that approaching movement and stasis through the lens of im/mobility risks privileging academic jargon over Indigenous experiences—where terms like “going on the land,” or “going hunting” are more accurately and culturally grounded—the notion of im/mobility remains a useful analytic tool for critically examining how colonial structures have attempted to regulate, restrict, and define Indigenous relationships to land and movement (Sheller, 2018a). We begin with an outline of Tthets'ėhk'édélį im/mobility practices and then explore the impacts of residential and day school policies on these practices.

Tthets'ėhk'édélį im/mobilities as land relationships

Historically, as the seasons changed, the Tthets'ėhk'édélį Got'ie would move throughout their traditional territory, spending winters around the “Fish Lakes”, including Tthets'eh K'ė (McGill Lake), Dechį Náíʔa (Deep Lake), Ezáa Łue Túe (Ekali Lake), Tłonįe (Sanguez Lake), and Tłtęłį (Gargan Lake), and Edėhzhie (Horn Plateau), and the summer months around Tthets'ėhk'édélį. They followed traditional trails to their summer and winter camps that “mark

where [our ancestors] have been, and where we should be going...” and are filled with the “stories that are given to us by our grandmothers and grandfathers” (Stan, June 6, 2023).

As the snow melted, the Tthets’éhk’édélı Got’ie would make their way back to Tthets’éhk’édélı. Some would paddle downriver to the confluence, hunting beavers along the way (Helm, 1961) and others would walk, accompanied by their dogs (Richard, April 21, 2023). As Rufus explains, in the olden days, Tthets’éhk’édélı Got’ie didn’t have access to automotive transportation (May 19, 2023), and, as a result, “everybody walked” (community member, June 8, 2023). “Our forefathers, they’d walk for miles to go get a moose,” a community member explains (May 31, 2023). Cathy recalls:

I remember Dad was telling me when they came from Ekali Lake down to the river, just up here, they walked. Like I said, everybody walked. And if you’ve got too much load, then the dogs have a little bag on their backs. And Dad was saying one time they were coming down and they had shot a moose. ... but it was a little up the river, and then everybody, even little kids have backpacks, and everybody went. A community thing. That was so important then. (May 19, 2023)

Elder Margaret explains what the community would do next with all the meat,

since my father was the Chief [in the mid 1900’s], it is his responsibility to divide the meat. So, all the dog sleds would come and it’s in the evening. They’d put the gas lamps up and that’s when we play. While they divided it, and then, depending on the number of moose they kill, they remember previously which woman got the moose hide. And then, the other

woman, the next one in the line would get a moose hide. That's how they shared stuff.
(April 4, 2024)

Through this process, everybody ate, and nobody was left behind. In other words, im/mobility and cultural practices ensured everyone had enough food and resources to survive.

In the olden days, a community member shares, “our Elders would shoot a moose and they would use everything. You know, put the bones back into the bush and there wouldn't be any waste—[they'd] use the hide as clothes...” (community member, May 31, 2024). Medina elaborates on leaving certain pieces of the harvest behind, “you're supposed to skin the moose where you shoot it so you can leave certain parts for the land” (June 8, 2023). Connie explains that this practice is tethered to a culture of “respect,” whereby “if you respect the land the land will respect you with what you need” (May 16, 2023).

Embedded in this culture of respect is also land stewardship. Stan explains that the ancestors “did not overharvest one area,” instead “they moved around [their] traditional lands” hunting and harvesting in accordance with the spatial and temporal seasonal species population booms (June 6, 2023): fish in the winter at the Fish Lakes (community member, May 31, 2023), beavers in the spring down along the creeks (Gus, May 19, 2023), an abundance of all species in the summer at the confluence (Margaret, April 4, 2024), and moose in the muskeg during the fall time (Anthony, June 10, 2023). These de-centralized practices ensured the wellbeing and longevity of non-human species, which, in-turn, sustained the Tthets'ėhk'édélı Got'ie.

A log building, later renamed Louie Norwegian School (LNS), opened in 1952. It was a deliberate act against the residential school system—ensuring that the young children could remain in their community, on their homelands, and be educated locally. According to the federally-legislated and imposed colonial government, day-school began in late-August and continued until late-June, whereby Monday-Friday attendance with a one-hour lunch break was mandatory (Helm, 1961). This created a series of disruptions for the Tł̓t̓h̓s' éhk'édél̓ Got'ie. Particularly, the school reinforced settler-colonial spatiality, fixing the young people and their guardians near the school where they could easily meet their attendance requirements (Margaret, April 4, 2024), until they aged out and were sent to another community to finish off their schooling. These changes meant that students could no longer go to the Fish Lakes for the winter and move alongside the ebbs and flows of the land (Rufus, May 19, 2023). It also meant that the students could seldomly “hear stories from the Elders” (community member, May 19, 2023) and watch them “pay the land with tobacco” when they “set loche hooks in the winter” (community member, June 8, 2023). This impacted the transmission of knowledge, including language.

“You can’t learn Traditional Knowledge [or language] anywhere else [but on the land],” a community member shares, “it’s a practical thing [that] you got to be there to experience” (March 20, 2024). As Elder Margaret explains,

If you’re growing up in the language you seem to know the unspoken of [it], you could almost read between the lines...Nowadays, it’s very difficult to tell the young people the importance of being on the land. The importance of knowing your language because your language seems to be so connected with the land. (April 4, 2024)

The opening of the LNS and the normalization of the colonial schooling requirements was a major disruption to the way of life, the fact that it kept children in the community was a major victory for maintaining some degree of cultural continuity. Rufus (May 19, 2023) explains, “On the weekends, we’d go out and set snares.” Elder Margaret shares one of those stories:

So, [my siblings and I] had a snare line, you know, an area where it goes kind of like in a loop. And so, when the school is out, we’d take off on a run to check our snare lines and then come back. But, on weekends, on Saturdays and Sundays, we spend all day in the bush...But sometimes on Saturdays or Sundays—halfway through the loop, we have a camp—and if we get [a fresh] rabbit in the middle of the winter and it’s still not frozen, then we get to our halfway camp, make a fire, and skin that rabbit and end up eating it, the three of us.

Elder Margaret and her siblings’ actions reinforced a balanced, reciprocal relationship whereby they continued to demonstrate care for the land through responsible hunting and harvesting practices, and the land responded by ensuring they could continue to harvest food.

The establishment of LNS not only altered the seasonal patterns of im/mobility maintained by the community, but it also reshaped the spatial distribution of where and when people went out on the land. This shift was facilitated by the introduction of quads and skidoos. These motorized vehicles made it easier for families to get out onto the land in a shorter amount of time (Arial, June 10, 2023), thereby compensating for the spatial and temporal losses imposed by the school. Arial explains that skidoos and quads are “just more convenient” for harvesting (June 10, 2023). “For

every five minutes that you're traveling on or by skidoo or ATV," Arial notes, "is like 15-30 minutes walking" (June 10, 2023). Further, "you can go off-road" (Anthony, June 10, 2023) and "farther into the bush" (Medina, June 8, 2023).

Conversely, skidoos and quads also heightened the safety risk of travelling on the land. Joanne explains,

I've been back and forth [in the bush] with a dog team with my parents, and then the skidoo came. I got left behind when they had a skidoo. They didn't want me to get hurt. The skidoo meant that people could go farther from the home and farther from help. The dog team was non-stop. You learn how the dogs operate, and you can keep them going. The skidoo breaks and you're stuck [...] And then I had to start school so I couldn't go on the land anymore either, only on weekends. (May 19, 2023)

In addition to the heightened safety concerns, the introduction of quads and skidoos changed the experience of travelling on the land. A community member explains that "the energy you get from [walking or using a dog team], is a lot different from what you get from driving a [motorized vehicle]" (March 20, 2024). Although motorized vehicles offer convenience and efficiency, Elder Margaret emphasizes that traditional ways of travelling foster a deeper connection with the land. She elaborates:

I've always said that we've always used moccasins. Soft sole, and when we walk in the bush, we step on rocks and twigs. It's almost kind of like massaging the bottom of our feet. And so that kind of helps us connect with the Earth energy. It's almost like, exchanging energy, your energy with the Earth's. And so, it's kind of like a cycle. And when you camp,

you usually put your blankets down on the ground. And so, when you sleep on the ground, like there again, you're right there on Earth and you're sharing energy and so it's continuously working on your body so that you're healthy all the time. (April 4, 2024)

Despite the pressures imposed by the traditional settler-school system, land-based practices and experiences remain integral to LNS and its attending youth. An employee at Louie Norwegian School explains,

We spend many days (all year round) going on nature walks and collecting specimens of local flora and fauna. We go fishing in the spring and in ice fishing in the winter. We visit our cabin at Jackfish Creek for our fall and summer culture camps. We bring in Elders to do demonstrations. For example, this year we had a lynx skinned in the school as well as a demo of how traps are set and work. (June 2, 2023)

Arial reflects on her experiences growing up with the school-facilitated culture camps,

We'd stay in canvas tents with stoves and stay out there for a week, I think the longest that I remembered is just a week being out on the land in the wintertime, or the springtime. And they had, of course, the Elders. They had Gus there helping us, showing us kids how to make a fire, and how to make a proper snaring line for rabbits, and take us kid's kind of around the general area. There was a lot of community then, when I was younger... Everybody was always out in the bush together, and just that inclusion of families and

teachers and having all these outdoor events and all that stuff. Land-based programming was one of my main highlights growing up here. (June 10, 2023)

Then, when students reach grade ten and must move out of Tłtsets'éhk'édélı to finish their schooling, they become more immobile in their lived experiences. They move into a school-managed residence, also known as “hostels” (Howard, May 16, 2023), where they “don’t go out on the land” (community member, June 8, 2023). “Only with [extended family in these other communities],” a community member shares, “will [my son who lives in the hostel] have the opportunity to go out on the land” (June 8, 2023).

A community member explains the long-term significance of this:

Going on the land is a skill we need because we know that at some point something is going to happen in this world, something drastic where we’re going to need to revert to living on the land. Without that skill, we’ll die, as a culture and as people. And, like you see, with the world now, the food shortages, droughts, fires, floods, you know, it’s all going to affect us all soon, and we need that skill. (May 31, 2023)

Through these accounts from community members, we can trace the impacts of settler colonial institutions on Tłtsets'éhk'édélı Got'ie im/mobility, including seasonal movements and reciprocal relations with the land and animals. We can also see how, despite the Western-imposed ongoing pressures, land-based practices and relationships continue to underscore Indigenous knowledge, language, connection to place, and cultural survivance. In the following section, we further explore im/mobility as a lived expression of pedagogy and sovereignty amidst ongoing colonial pressures.

Sovereignty, pedagogy, and resistance

This study demonstrates that im/mobility is not simply an act of movement and stasis; it is a living pedagogy and expression of sovereignty. For the Tłtsh'éhk'édélı́ Got'ie, im/mobility is a relational, affective, and culturally-grounded practice that reflects Indigenous law, worldviews, and actively refuses settler-colonial containment (Barker, 2014; Farbotko, 2018; Starblanket & Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2019; Vizenor, 2008). It is, in other words, a key act of survivance and resurgence. Building on scholarship that frames Indigenous im/mobility as a relational and sovereign act, this research shows how Tłtsh'éhk'édélı́ im/mobility patterns sustain Indigenous relationships to time, land, education, memory, and community.

Among the Tłtsh'éhk'édélı́ Got'ie, im/mobility is more than physical movement and stasis through time and space, it is a process through which Traditional Knowledge is transmitted, maintained, and renewed. It is intertwined with individual and collective Indigenous memory, emotion and spirit (Bräuchler & Ménard, 2017; Salazar & González, 2021), thereby upholding the “robust social institutions that are developed” through “ceremonial relationships” (Whyte et al., 2019, p. 324). As shown by the Tłtsh'éhk'édélı́ Got'ie, im/mobility practices are inseparable from embodied memory, language, spiritual connections to place, and the transfer of Traditional Knowledge that occurs in tandem with collective, land-based activities. These transfers include hunting and harvesting protocols, land-stewardship practices, seasonal knowledge, and spiritual teachings—all of which are passed through collective im/mobility experiences. This supports earlier work that suggests Indigenous im/mobility must be understood through spiritually and ontologically relevant groundings (Todd, 2016).

As Dene scholar Glen Coulthard explains, “most Western societies...tend to derive meaning from the world in historical/developmental terms” (2014, p. 60). In contrast, many

Indigenous communities and Peoples derive meaning through reciprocal relationships to the land, which offer “a way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 60). Coulthard (2014, p. 62) explains this as “grounded normativity,” a “non-exploitative” land-based approach to knowing, being, relating, and moving through the world. Such an approach enables deep relationships to land which sustains and strengthens Indigenous culture and the transfer of Traditional Knowledge (Coulthard, 2014; Ford et al., 2020). Moreover, it fosters what Whyte and colleagues (2019) explain as an intricate reciprocity between the land and humans, through which social institutions, including ceremony, “religious and cultural narratives, societal ways of life, and political and economic systems are a part of the ecosystems or socio-ecological contexts that [Indigenous communities and Peoples] live in and remember” (p. 324). In this sense, Traditional Knowledge is a living, land-based system of relationships, practices, and teachings that are embodied in time and place (Pearce et al., 2015; Ray, 2023). Respecting these relational influences are, as Oliveira (2014) and Rifkin (2017) suggest, an assertion of sovereignty through the reclamation of time and practice. In this way, im/mobility is both a living pedagogy and an act of refusal—one that upholds the Dene Laws, reclaims Indigenous spatial and temporal presence, and insists upon the resurgence of Indigenous practices amidst the pressures of settler colonialism.

Land-informed im/mobilities help challenge the settler-colonial logics of time and space. Despite imposed colonial temporalities—such as the rigid schedules of Western schooling—community members enact alternative spatial temporalities, through hunting and harvesting practices that are rooted in the rhythms of relationships, the seasons, and changing technologies. Technological shifts—such as the introduction of quads and skidoos—have also reshaped im/mobility practices and trajectories (Lede et al., 2021). For some, these advancements have enabled continued engagement with the land, making hunting and harvesting more accessible in

terms of time and physical ability (as described by Arial, Medina, and Anthony). Motorized transportation has made it possible to spend evenings and weekends on the land (Walsh, 2022), which can help to “reinforce” spiritual connections to the land (D. Young, 2001). For others, however, the same technologies have introduced new restrictions to their participation due to safety reasons (as noted by Joanne), and the financial barriers of buying and sustaining motorized transportation (Lede et al., 2021). As noted by Margaret, they also mediate relationships with the land in a different way from traditional forms of travel like walking or dog sledding. In this way, technologies and institutions like schools have reconfigured not only the amount of time spent on the land, but the quality of time spent—reshaping relationships to land, spirituality, im/mobility, and knowledge systems (Weatherdon, 2022). These shifts also reshape how and when Traditional Knowledge is shared, altering not only the practice of transmission but the contexts necessary for its full understanding. The intention of this analysis isn’t to suggest whether this is good or bad; rather, it reflects evolving negotiations with relational entanglements among land, im/mobility practices and technologies, available resources, education, and time.

Despite settler and technological influences, Indigenous im/mobility practices remain rooted in land-based relationships, ontologies, and epistemologies (Ødegaard, 2016; L. B. Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019). For the Tłtsh’édélı́ Got’ie, these practices are expressed through the embodiment of Dene Laws, which guide people to “live life in a good way” (Cluderay et al., 2022, p. 54). Im/mobility, thus, is not only about movement, but lived expressions of reciprocity, respect, responsibility, and relationality. Through acts like paying the land—offering thanks and gifts, such as sacred medicines like tobacco—Indigenous peoples can reaffirm their relationships with the land and all its beings (Kimmerer, 2013; Sacco, 2020) and embody assertions of, agency, and self-determination (L. B. Simpson, 2017). In this way, im/mobility

emerges not only as a means of control and survival, it is a practice of refusal and resurgence whose pedagogy is rooted in Indigenous “epistemological, linguistic, and institutional” practices, including relationships to land, memory, and practices (Whyte et al., 2019, p. 323), one that is reinforced by the Dene Laws.

Conclusion

This paper explores how Indigenous im/mobility is tied to relationality, refusal, resistance, and cultural continuity within the context of sovereignty over land relations, knowledge, and identity. It shows that for the Tł̓t̓h̓s'ėhk'édél̓ Got'ie, im/mobility is more than an embodied practice of movement and stasis through time and space, constituting also a pedagogy infused with relational nuances that contextualize everyday practices. In doing so, it exposes the politics of movement and stillness, situating Indigenous presence within time, space, and the land.

While we have prepared this article with care—not only to avoid reproducing colonial academic legacies, but also to honour the participants and their ideas (Dufty-Jones & Gibson, 2022)—we acknowledge our limitations as a collective of settler and Indigenous authors in writing about Indigenous concepts and practices. Although Indigenous scholars have deeply explored the ontological foundations of land-based im/mobility (L. B. Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019), much of the academic field, including this work to some degree, continues to reflect settler lenses and ideas of Indigenous im/mobility. Thus, we have employed the concept of im/mobility as an analytical tool to interrogate settler-colonial structures that continue to impact Indigenous im/mobility experiences, while recognizing that it cannot and does not fully capture the cultural and relational meanings that Indigenous Peoples attach to going on the land, travelling in the bush through being with time and space.

Nonetheless, we maintain that im/mobility remains a useful analytical approach for understanding how Indigenous people and communities respond to colonial policies. It illuminates the resilience and nuances of relational, land-based pedagogies that continue to give meaning to Indigenous cultures and communities, despite historic and ongoing disruptions. This insight is particularly important for policymakers at all scales as it deepens discussions on the impacts of colonial policy and reasserts power and agency in Indigenous communities. By centering these findings, policymakers can better support land-based mobility services—such as the Northwest Territories’ Community Harvesters Assistance Program—by aligning funding and regulations with seasonal rhythms, logistical restraints, and cultural priorities. Similarly, youth-serving organizations (like Northern Youth Leadership, Ecology North, and education council boarding homes) can strengthen their existing programs (Woodworth et al., 2025) to provide culturally grounded experiences that counter colonial im/mobility logics. Finally, Dene Chiefs and Councils can use this research to advocate for culturally grounded, community-based im/mobility education programs that affirm and enact Indigenous sovereignty.

The findings and discussion were shared with the Tł̨́t̨́t̨́s’ė́hk’édélı́ Got’ie through a Canoe Day on June 6th, 2023, where we brought young people (aged 10-18), community members (aged 18-65), and Elders together on the land. Together, we paddled up and down the Jean Marie River (Figure 16), stopping at Elder-identified culturally significant places, beaver lodges, and freshwater creeks. This program served to highlight the knowledge shared in this work while returning it to the community in relevant, culturally grounded ways, showcasing how im/mobility research can move beyond the literature. Sharing our findings out on the land enabled dialogue, validation, and connection with ways that honoured our relational accountability to each other and the land, thereby offering another way that im/mobility scholarship can engage with communities

beyond literature. Further, this relational process of knowledge mobilization reaffirms the community's sovereignty over the knowledge presented in this paper, and its transmission to the youngest Tłtsets'éhk'édélı Got'ie.



Figure 17: Canoeing the Jean Marie River

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Chapter 5 References

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Figure 18: Evenings and Weekends, by Sophie Rivers.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter concludes the dissertation. It briefly summarizes the research findings and reflects on key themes, contributions, and relationships that structure it. The chapter then discusses future research opportunities and northern research realities.

Summary of Findings

This dissertation aims to examine Indigenous im/mobility in an ontologically and epistemologically relevant way to the Tłtsh'édélı́ Got'ie in the Dehcho Region, Northwest Territories. It addresses the question, “How do the Tłtsh'édélı́ Got'ie experience and give meaning to im/mobility as a relationally informed practice in the Dehcho Region?” In doing so, it responds to these objectives: (1) to investigate the values that influence how the Tłtsh'édélı́ Got'ie move through time and space, contributing to a culturally grounded framework to articulate im/mobility; (2) to foreground Indigenous relationships to land and climate change to understand how im/mobility functions as an embodied, relational practice; and (3) to examine how im/mobility operates as pedagogy amidst assertions of Indigenous sovereignty.

Indigenous Peoples and communities have been im/mobile since time immemorable (Simpson, 2017). This research broadens the available im/mobility literature by exposing how Indigenous im/mobility continues to support Indigenous practiced relationships to the land and culture. Specifically, chapter 3 outlines how im/mobility fosters a reciprocal relationship with the land, subsistence, and Traditional Knowledge. It underscores how im/mobility is more than physical movement through time and space, but rather a cultural, spiritual, and relational practice. The chapter shows how im/mobility is an embodied relationship that enables connection with the

land, which supports subsistence autonomy, and strengthens the intergenerational transfer of Traditional Knowledge. In doing so, it responds to the first research objective.

Chapter 4 examines the relationship between climate and land-based changes and im/mobility. It illustrates how cultural, social, and political-ecological relationships are entangled with im/mobility, thereby reinforcing the relevance of land-based academic frameworks to assess relational practices. More specifically, it explores how berry harvesting, despite ongoing and rapid-onset environmental changes, remains an embodied, educational practice, one through which survival skills, cultural teachings, and Traditional Knowledge are shared. It highlights the human-land relationship in the context of movement through time and space, showing that im/mobility is not an outcome of climate change but an integral part of living with the land. It responds to the second objective.

Chapter 5 shows how colonial pressures alter land-based im/mobility practices and patterns, thereby addressing the third research objective. The chapter demonstrates how im/mobility functions both as a tool of colonial control and a means of resistance and refusal. It shows that despite pressures to both change and resist, im/mobility remains an important practice for sustaining land-based practices, cultural values, and seasonal rhythms. As transportation and travel technologies evolve and adapt, the chapter highlights the different methods that the Tłtsh'édél' Got'ie use to continually uphold respect, reciprocity, and responsibility to the land and pedagogy.

Taken together, the chapters suggest that im/mobility sustains Indigenous life and livelihoods. It offers an alternative narrative of im/mobility, one that is more than a means to an economic end (Cresswell et al., 2016) or a method of adaptation (Blondin, 2021; Rodriguez-Pena, 2023). Focusing on the experiences of the Tłtsh'édél' Got'ie in a culturally grounded way

helps reveal how im/mobility is central to Indigenous Peoples relationships to land, asserting Indigenous presence, sovereignty, knowledge, and identity through both movement and stasis across time, space, and land.

Im/mobility justice encourages researchers to seek alternative understandings of im/mobility to reconceptualize “historical bodily relations, ecological relations, and wider relations that inform the political arena” (Sheller, 2018, p. 28). It involves “overturning marginalization and disadvantage through intentional inclusion of the excluded” (Sheller, 2018, p. 29). This dissertation responds to the main tenets of im/mobility justice by highlighting the centrality of land-based relationships and meanings as key components of Indigenous im/mobility. It highlights the various systemic factors—including environmental and colonial—that shape historic and contemporary meanings of im/mobility, offering a justice-oriented perspective on both movement and stasis through time and space.

Contributions

This section outlines the theoretical, methodological, policy, community, and personal contributions made by this dissertation.

Theoretical

This research offers a departure from the im/mobility literature in a few ways. First, it highlights how relationships with the land, subsistence, and Traditional Knowledge collectively shape and give meaning to im/mobility experiences. By focusing on Indigenous im/mobility through a culturally relevant lens, this research offers an alternative conceptual approach to im/mobility. In doing so, it challenges the historic Western bias (Ballantyne, 2018; Prout, 2014) by demonstrating the insights gained through relational approaches. Next, it demonstrates how

coevolving relations to land, community, and culture are sustained through im/mobility practices. This exposes the more-than-human relational processes (Chanteloup et al., 2018) that influence im/mobility, showcasing the inseparability of social relations from the natural environment in the context of climate change. This offers an alternative approach to assess the various “factors” that shape climate-induced movement (Black et al., 2011, p. S4). Finally, the research shows how despite the ongoing and dynamic pressures of climate change and colonialism, Indigenous People continually assert sovereignty and space through im/mobility. To do so, it explores how control over Indigenous im/mobility is both a colonial tool (Mountain, 2019; B. Young, 2015) and an embodied practice of its refusal (Simpson, 2017; Whyte et al., 2019). Thus, it reveals the complex and dynamic layers of power and resistance that shape Indigenous im/mobility practices.

Theoretically, the chapters expose the importance of applying a culturally relevant lens to im/mobility research. It shows how these approaches can expose deep, meaningful explorations of what drives and gives meaning to movement through time and space beyond Western paradigms. It advances both im/mobility and mobility justice research by acknowledging and better accounting for relationships, meanings, and worldviews that are often overlooked in contemporary research.

Methodological

This research offers an example of relational and reciprocal intercultural research. It shows the value of complex ethical approaches and uniquely tailored interview questions to sustain relational accountability at all phases of the research. It offers one roadmap to meaningful research that has positively impacted the community where it occurred. In doing so, it outlines how research

can be an act of decolonization as it respectfully acknowledges and relies on Indigenous worldviews, ideologies, beliefs, and practices (Hart, 2010; Linklater, 2014).

In addition, this research highlights the value of deep, ongoing relations that shape and inform the research process. This collaborative approach ensured community values remained at the center of the work, and it prioritized long-term relationships with the land, community members, and the researcher, collaboratively grounding the research in the community. While I do not believe living in the North to be an essential process of ethical, collaborative, intercultural research (see Ireland et al., Forthcoming), the presented methodological journey (chapter 2) shows how building a research project in place through sustained engagement and collaboration with community members is possible. Moreover, it outlines one reflexive and adaptive approach that is based on relational accountability and contributes towards a broader research program and community ownership of knowledge.

Finally, this research shows the importance of intentional reciprocal knowledge dissemination activities. This research mobilized conversational methods, written, visual, and embodied methods through community-oriented programming to share key findings. Collectively, these approaches demonstrate how relationships (including those to people, place, and culture) can be at the heart of knowledge dissemination, thereby sustaining relational accountability through all stages of the research (Wilson, 2008).

Policy-oriented

Climate im/mobility justice involves actively decolonizing dominant im/mobility narratives (Yumagulova et al., 2023). Central to this is the acceptance that Indigenous relational sovereignty must replace capitalist worldviews, which continue to structure national and

international policies that govern Indigenous bodies in place and time (Farbotko, 2018; Yumagulova et al., 2023). This claim builds on Farbotko's (2018) work which explores how local Indigenous voices need to be consulted in relocation and adaptation planning in Fiji. Her work explains that many institutional policies and procedures insufficiently account for Indigenous worldviews and further adhere Indigenous communities to colonial policies. This insight applies to remote communities in the Northwest Territories, where policymakers can draw on this research to better understand the relational contexts and factors through which their decisions reverberate. Such an approach would support programs and policies that are relationally grounded and better aligned with Indigenous experiences. It emphasizes the importance of breaking policy and funding silos to attend to the relational and interconnected dimensions of Indigenous life and im/mobility, more accurately reflecting the lived realities of Indigenous Peoples and communities. The outcomes of im/mobility extend beyond the immediate acts of moving and stopping in time and space, underscoring the need for policy makers to recognize and support the broader relational impacts.

For Tthets'éhk'édélı

This dissertation documents and amplifies both theories and practices of im/mobility in Tthets'éhk'édélı. It offers conceptual language that Chief and Council may find useful in their community planning and programming. As such, it is an additional resource the community can use to advocate for initiatives that bring youth, Elders, land-users, and knowledge holders together to strengthen their relationships with land, culture, time, place, and each other.

Many residents lost photos, written stories, and crafts from their ancestors during the 2021 flood. The data and research outputs, including the interview recordings, transcripts, and

coinciding artwork, have been returned to participants and the First Nation, where it is safely stored for future access. As such, it modestly contributes to post-flood rebuilding and redocumenting efforts.

In addition, the Dene Zhatie translations and recordings of research articles contribute to the community's ongoing language revitalization efforts. These documents belong to the First Nation and can be used and reproduced at their will.

Finally, this dissertation shares stories from the Tthets'éhk'édélı Got'ie. For some, it can be impactful to have their stories and perspectives documented and shared through academic research.

Personal

This dissertation has become a part of my story. It impacts how I move, and will continue to move, through the world as a well-educated, white-settler ally, and environmental educator.

When I think back to my motivations for starting this project, I return to the concept of Tikun Olam. I understand this work as part of my ongoing efforts to contribute to the well-being of the world through my relations. Along the way, I have built and deepened friendships that may have never otherwise existed, and these relationships have helped me sharpen my awareness to the privileges and opportunities that shape who I am. I am deeply grateful for the knowledge exchanges I have been a part of over the past six years, and I will carry these teachings forward throughout my life and work.

This research has also brought nuance and relevance to how I approach my career as an environmental educator. When I teach northern youth about concepts like floods, droughts, and wildfires, I now emphasize the human dimensions of climate change and im/mobility, all of which

have been informed by this work. I am grateful to the Tłtsh'édélı Got'ie who trust me to share their stories as I move through this earth.

Future Research

Among the settler gaze, the Northwest Territories “has long been a repository of resources and dreams” (Hall, 2022, p. 3). Extractive industries, particularly mines, continue to significantly contribute towards the territorial GDP (Hall, 2022), while sustaining mechanisms of dispossession that increase the land-holding, capital gaining interests of imperial organizations (Kulchyski & Bernauer, 2014). Many of these organizations are disproportionately held in communities outside of the North (Bernauer, 2019). This has had profound socio-economic impacts on communities in the Northwest Territories, as it fuels the mechanisms of violent dispossession that continue to separate Indigenous Peoples from their land and culture while discursively transforming Indigenous bodies into working class labourers (Coulthard, 2014; Hall, 2022).

Drawing on the Marxist theory of primitive accumulation, Coulthard (2014) explains how profit-seeking organizations, including the state, are in constant search of new lands and resources to exploit for capital gain. This often begins with overt and forceful violence that leads to dispossession and control, then subsumes into the normalized social, political, economic, and environmental structures of everyday life (Coulthard, 2014; Wolfe, 2006). This includes the residential school system and settlement policies that took people off the land (and seasonal rhythms) and situated them in permanent residences (Lawrence, 2012). Beyond settlement, the active and enforced restrictions on hunting and harvesting and access to traditional lands, also limited the Dene's ability to ensure food sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014). These structures not only took people away from their traditional food sources, creating reliance on centralized food systems,

but they also contributed to normalizing transactional services essential for individual survival (Hall, 2021).

In addition, settler colonial capitalism has shifted the meanings of labour and what is seen as work, recreation, and social reproduction (Camfield, 2019; Hall, 2022). That is, berry-picking, sewing, and fishing (often considered traditionally women's activities), were seen outside the domain of capital production and therefore offered no monetary gain (Camfield, 2019). Given the increasingly reliance on money for food and shelter (among other material items), people could no longer afford to spend time harvesting or sewing, they had to focus their energy on income-earning activities instead. Yet, activities outside Western economic interest persist in the North. Hall (2016) refers to these unpaid practices as “sites of struggle” that decolonize the main tenets of capitalism (p. 98). That is, they are inherently tied to Indigenous sovereignty and cultural resurgence as they prioritize relationships with the land and community over profit accumulation (Atleo, 2015; Simpson, 2017).

Despite the strength in these practices and lived relationships that counter capitalist worldviews, the land continues to be exposed to complex and ongoing challenges imposed by capitalist pursuits. In response to the Alberta tar sands, upriver of the NWT, Lubicon Cree activist Melina Laboucan-Massimo explains,

The Alberta tar sands are scaring the earth—polluting and draining watershed, poisoning the air and destroying the land I call home. The landscape is drastically changing from a once pristine and beautiful boreal forest to an increasingly industrial and toxic terrain. Animals and fish have become sick with tumours, and caribou are now listed as an endangered species ... Today, the earth is being contaminated and destroyed at an

unparalleled rate, and people and animals alike are being sacrificed for the benefit of the greedy few. (as cited by Alook et al., 2023, p. 30)

In Tłtshets'éhk'édélı́, as explained by various community members, new species of fish are migrating farther south down the Dehcho and disrupting the local ecology (Jonas, June 9, 2023), and the thawing permafrost is releasing harmful metals into local lakes making it unsafe to fish (community member, May 31, 2024). Bears are wandering into the community in search of food to compensate for dying berry patches, while moose are going deeper into the bush as they travel around burn sites in search of fresh willows (community member, May 31, 2024). The warming climate is causing the winter ice to become less stable and predictable, and the thawing permafrost is creating unevenness in the muskegs (Jonas, June 9, 2023). These changing landscapes and animal patterns, induced by pressures the capitalist system places on the land, have made it more dangerous and sometimes inaccessible to travel, thereby growing reliance on centralized food systems and motorized transportation.

Yet, there remains a particular irony regarding the growing dependence on motorized vehicles: time on the land to engage in anti-capitalist ventures requires money. Not only does wage labour offer the necessary resources to pay for vehicles and gas (community member, May 31, 2024), it also competes for valuable time that would otherwise be spent out on the land with Elders (Anthony, June 10, 2023). As Medina says, “since I’ve started working, it’s hard to get time off [to go out on the land]” (June 8, 2023). The economic factors that undermine present-day im/mobility, coupled with the changing landscape, have reduced the wide-spread accessibility of the land, limiting it to those with disposable income, knowledge, skills, time, and resources to get

out on the land (Lede et al., 2021). As such, this has fundamentally shifted the social, cultural, and material reproduction patterns of the community, further aligning it with settler colonial Canada.

The capitalist economy brought an uneven gendered division of labour, whereby women were tacitly forced to care for the home, “scrubbing diapers, cooking, or cleaning” (Marilyn, May 10, 2023). This uneven division of labour generally immobilized women to the home and afforded men the responsibility of im/mobility, inclusive of the socio-cultural benefits involved. This spatially divorced sites of social reproduction from sites of capital gain, devaluing the economic role of women in communities, fundamentally shifting cultural reproduction, language learning and use, and family structures in northern communities (Hall, 2022).

Today, northern Canada can be read as a mixed-economy, one that combines Indigenous and settler life, including socio-political organization, food systems, cultural activities, worldviews, and ways of knowing (Coulthard, 2014; Hall, 2022). The capitalist economy has integrated into Indigenous economies and is reproduced through ongoing negotiations and resistance of colonization (Hall, 2022). That is, Indigenous Peoples have become increasingly reliant on wage labour for fuel, firearms, snowmobiles, and boats; tools that help them connect with the land in safe, efficient, and culturally informed ways (Hall, 2022). As such, the confines of capitalism continue to set the limits of time, resources, and opportunities for Indigenous im/mobility.

Capitalism, grounded in values of never ending accumulation and growth, has transformed culturally informed practices into economic calculations that ask, is it worth it (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016)? While a seemingly important question, it reduces complex relationships into economic values to be measured and weighed. This notion reinforces the dissertation’s overarching argument that land-based frameworks are essential to understanding Indigenous im/mobility as a

relational practice. It is simultaneously political, cultural, environmental, spiritual, and economic—factors that cannot be fully measured or weighted. Future research could more explicitly detail how capitalist structures influence im/mobility to get a better sense of how individuals navigate the trade-offs between cultural practices and economic realities. Such work would help expose the lived experiences, including the challenges and opportunities, of everyday im/mobility.

Further, research on how changing species migration patterns impact im/mobility trends and trajectories would align well with studies examining the economic costs of im/mobility. As species migration patterns shift alongside landscape changes caused by wildfires, mining, and other forms of resource extraction, hunters will be forced to make new trails and travel farther into the bush to harvest their food. This increased distance and effort will raise the temporal and financial costs associated with land-based food systems. Such more-than-human im/mobilities research could yield valuable insights for policy makers, land-use planners, and community harvesters.

[My Northern PhD Research Realities](#)

Academic institutions have a long history of reproducing and strengthening colonial rhetoric through their self-imposed power and authority in defining what counts as valid knowledge (Smith, 2021). Yet, the premise of ontological pluralism suggests that various knowledge, truth, and ways of knowing can be simultaneously true (Pernecky, 2016). Applied to this research, Wilson (2008) explains that “there should be no need for [Indigenous People] to constantly justify, validate or change our work in order to fit foreign research paradigms” (p. 127). While I recognize the existence of multiple truths and paradigms beyond my knowledge, I

also recognize my limited conceptual and practical ability to draw on them. As a settler-scholar working in an intercultural context, I recognize that Indigenous spirituality and Traditional Knowledge lie beyond the acceptable scope of my use and interpretation.

This research reflects how I, Brandon Pludwinski, have come to understand im/mobility in Tłtshé'éhk'édélı. Although the research emerged through collaborative efforts among settler-researchers, Indigenous Elders, community members, youth, and the land, the account shared in this dissertation is shaped through my perspective. While this is not a limitation, it warrants consideration of how another researcher, with different lived experiences and intersectional identities, might engage with, interpret, and present the research differently. Throughout the entire research process, I drew on my unique skillset, ethical compass, and personal and professional interests and networks to create the project described in this dissertation. Put simply, another researcher might do this work differently and reach different conclusions.

The widespread, dynamic, and ongoing threats of climate change presented significant challenges to this work. In 2023, the Northwest Territories experienced an unprecedented wildfire season, resulting in record numbers of evacuation orders and orders (K. Young & Roher, 2025). The following summers, 2024 and 2025, were likewise marked by severe wildfires that brought heavy smoke and repeated evacuations to the NWT. Aside from the coinciding practical limitations that delayed my research progress—such as cancelled community visits and engagement opportunities—these events profoundly influenced the relationships sustained through this research. I felt it inappropriate to conduct formal research or knowledge sharing activities when community members were living in states of uncertainty, either at home or displaced in hotel rooms throughout the NWT. Instead, I sent colouring sheets, dollar-store games, and chocolate bars to the youth and food baskets to community members and Elders.

Living through climate change, as challenging and uncertain as it is, provides an opportunity for important future research. The literature would benefit from an in-depth exploration of present-day disaster response im/mobility. While research at the territorial level exists (see K. Young & Roher, 2025), smaller-scale research would help reveal how residents uniquely navigate these challenges. This research can help us understand the lived experiences of climate change and better support those facing this unprecedented ongoing global challenge.

Concluding Thoughts

This dissertation demonstrates how im/mobility is an embodied, political, and cultural expression that situates autonomy and sovereignty across temporal and spatial scales. It illustrates how im/mobility, as a relational practice, enables connection to the land, supports subsistence autonomy, and facilitates the intergenerational transfer of Traditional Knowledge. This framing also offers alternative perspectives on the human-nature relationship in the context of climate-induced im/mobility, revealing im/mobility as an inherent part of living relationally with the land. Finally, the dissertation explores how im/mobility functions as both a tool of colonial control and a form of its resistance. Collectively, it shows that the Tthets'éhk'édélı Got'ie embody a relational form of im/mobility that extends far beyond the physical realm of movement through time and space. Though grounded in a northern context, this research shows how patterns of movement and stasis through time and space are not only a way of life—it's an invaluable practice for cultural survival.

Chapter 6 References

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Figure 19 To Trout, by Sophie Rivers

Appendix A: Expression of Interest to Chief and Council

Dear Chief and Council,

My name is Brandon Pludwinski. I am originally from Southern Ontario and have been living in Yellowknife for the past year and a few months. My family originally comes from Poland and made their way to Canada after World War II. I like to be on the land, canoe, play guitar, eat, and have fun. In Yellowknife, I work for Ecology North and am also a graduate student collaborating with Margaret Ireland and Dr. Alex Latta. Specifically, I am working on ways to engage youth and Elders in JMRFN's climate change research project to help the community better prepare for future floods and climate changes.

I am looking to move to Jean Marie River First Nation from January 2023 – June 2023. My focus in JMRFN would be to support the ongoing community-led climate change project through my own doctoral research. Living in the community would allow me to plan and facilitate more community events, meaningfully engage more community members in the work, and get a better sense of JMRFN to ensure more cultural values are incorporated in the work. Living in the community would also give me a chance to learn about the community's strengths, challenges, and aspirations, just by listening, observing, and having conversations, as I participate in a range of activities, support community events, and spend time with Elders and youth. Most importantly, spending time in the community in this way would equip me to make sure that the research I do is respectful and grounded in JMRFN's culture, protocols, and responds to community priorities.

I'll also be working remotely and part time for Ecology North. This means that I'll be able to contribute various environment and climate change related community workshops and activities (such as supporting community gardens like the one we did last year with LNS, creating compost systems, and canning and pickling). I also have a lot of experience working with kids and youth and would be happy to spend time with the kids in the community. I'd also like to spend time listening and learning from the Elders and getting a better sense of what it means to live in JMRFN – all of which would inform my dissertation. I'd approach living here with the intent of learning and also sharing.

Thanks,

Brandon

Appendix B: Orange (2016) Journal Prompts

Research Preparation

- What has the process been like for you to engage/access the community?
 - What notions of power/privilege did you carry through this process?
 - How have you strengthen/normalized the use of these privileges in the research process?
- How are you/might have you been perceived by JMRFN?
 - What could you/might you have done differently?
- What can/do you offer JMRFN?
- What would/could you have done differently?

Ethics

- What are the necessary steps to get ethics approval?
- Why do REBs exist?
- What does the process do to/for participants?

Recruitment

- What has the process been like for you to recruit participants?
 - What notions of power/privilege did you carry through this process?
 - How have you strengthen/normalized the use of these privileges in the research process?
- Why might people not want to participate in the study?
 - What sorts of things do the participants risk by participating?
 - How can you minimize/ease those risks?
- Am I being clear and honest with the commitment/what I ask of participants?
 - Are they being compensated fairly?

Data Collection

- How is the process going?
 - How do you believe the participants feel about the process?
 - Is it positively impacting them?
- Are you following-up with participants accordingly?
- Are you being honest about what you understand and don't understand?
- Is there anything you wish you could change/alter?
- How are my biases as a researcher impacting the data collection phase?
 - What assumptions am I carrying and in what ways are they driving my actions?
 - How do I challenge/stop this?
- Are all participants being treated fairly?
- How are my relations with the participants? Myself? My surroundings? Others not involved in the research?

Exhibition

- How am I feeling? How are the participants feeling?
- Is everyone ready?
- Why have the participants selected the photos they have?
 - What do the photos mean to them?
 - What does this project mean to them?
 - How are these answers supported through the conversations and actions of the research?
- What have we learned?
- What could/would I change?

Group Talks

- What is the point of these conversations?
- Why might some people not want to share?
 - What are some of the internal group dynamics that might harm some of the group talks participants?
 - What can I do to help everyone feel more comfortable?
- What am I nervous/concerned about?
- What am I excited about?

Overall / Ongoing

- How are you doing?
- What am I doing?
- What am I learning?
- Why am I here?
- As a researcher and new-Yellowknife resident, what legacies do I carry with me?
- What might JMRFN community members be thinking?
- How do I view myself as a researcher? Canadian? Climate activist?

Appendix C: uOttawa Research Ethics Board Approval

27/11/2023

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-11-23-9788
Titre du projet / Project Title	Jean Marie River First Nation Climate Change Adaptation
Type de projet / Project Type	Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral thesis
Statut du projet / Project Status	Approuvé / Approved
Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	27/11/2023
Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	31/10/2024

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher	Affiliation	Role
Brandon PLUDWINSKI	Département de géographie / Department of Geography	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Sonia WESCHE	Département de géographie / Department of Geography	Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

Laurier REB # 6992

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154
Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

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www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie | www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics

Appendix D: Draft Interview Guide

Arial and Tony

How often do you go on the land? How does it help you sustain your lifestyle?

What stops you from going on the land?

What are the things that you never go on the land without?

Have the ways you go on the land changed as you got older?

Can you tell me about what Edehzie is doing with the traditional trail rebuilding and mapping?

Why are these trails important to Dene people and Dene culture?

What impact did the wildfires have on how people travel to/from Edehzie? Did it change how often people go to Edehzie?

What changes have you noticed to animal migration patterns? *Ducks, moose, fish?*

How have these changes impacted harvesting patterns?

Has it impacted your diet and how you balance land food/traditional food?

How often do you come out to Ekali lake? Why do you come here?

How do you get back and forth from JMR to the lake?

Is it the same in all the seasons?

What have you learned about the land from travelling on it?

Appendix E: Participant Answered Question Guide

* Can you introduce yourselves?

* Can you share any fun memories of being on the land?
EKli lake, what stops us,

* How do you get on the land? What does that look like? Who do you go with?

* ☒ you once mentioned that you remember walking the access road to have a bonfire with some friends when you were younger. Can you tell me about walking the road with your friends at night? we used to walk from JmR ~~back~~ creek swimming or camp now days we can't do that climate change, also changed the animals everywhere is not safe no adults.

* Have you noticed any climate changes along the road over the years? i notice the tree tops drying up, more fires, berries and drying fast, water rise and down again.

Can you tell me about your familys experience of the flooding? Including the car and camping? Water raising?

How long was it until your house came in? Where did you live while waiting for the new house?

~~Can you tell me about all the garbage after the flood?~~

~~Can you tell me about the bears and the flooding?~~

Appendix F: Canoe Day Poster

Get Active



NWT
RECREATION
& PARKS
ASSOCIATION



Government of
Northwest Territories

FREE & OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Event: **Canoe Day!**
Date: **June 4, 2023**
Time: **3:30pm - 5:00pm**
Location: **Camp Site**

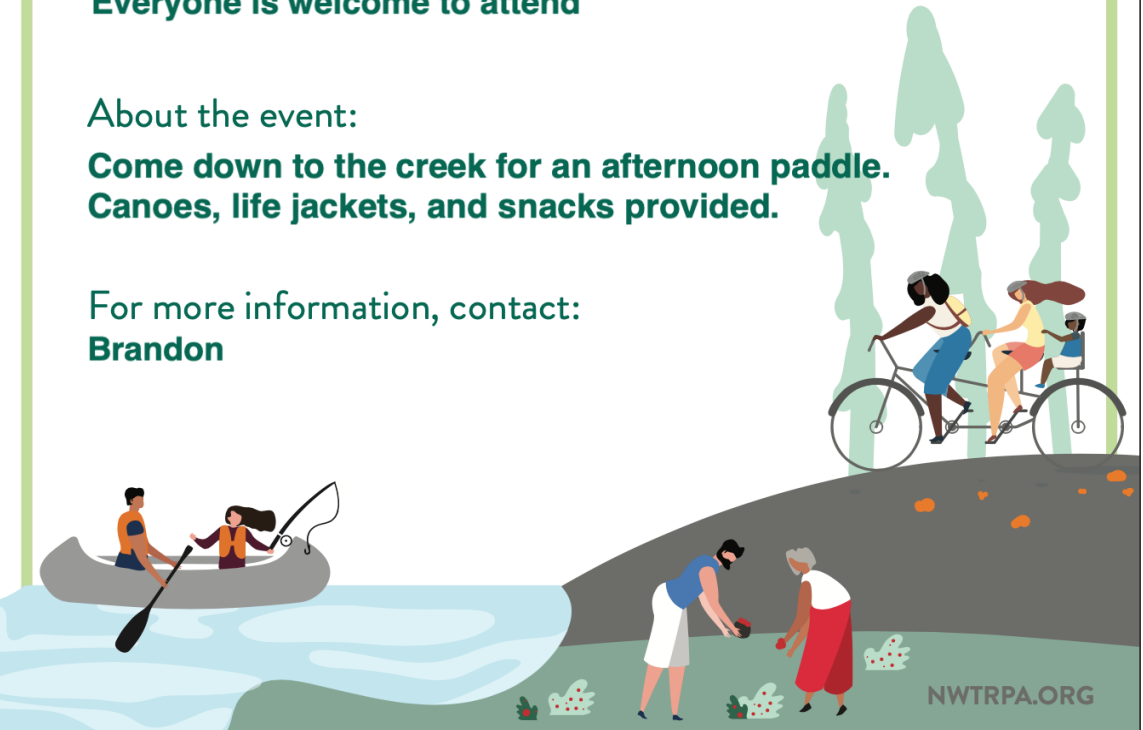


The Table Doo
JEAN MARIE RIVER, NT

Who should attend:
Everyone is welcome to attend

About the event:
**Come down to the creek for an afternoon paddle.
Canoes, life jackets, and snacks provided.**

For more information, contact:
Brandon



NWTRPA.ORG

Appendix G: Graphic Representation of the Research

