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# Transforming self through land and relations

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# Transforming self through land and relations

Erin Spring

## Abstract

In her piece, Dr. Erin Spring reflects on her role on the Raising Spirit Project as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Lethbridge. She shares how this work was a troubling and transformative experience as it asked her to confront what she *knows* about academic knowledge and about herself as a producer of academic knowledge. In particular, she was prompted to wrestle with concepts such as land, place, and identity.

I am an interdisciplinary scholar of young people, texts, and cultures interested in how young people articulate their place-based identities through their responses to texts. My experience with the Raising Spirit project as a postdoctoral fellow was a deeply troubling and transformative experience as it asked me to confront what I *know* about academic knowledge and about myself as a producer of academic knowledge. These issues continue to trouble me, and I feel called to return to this work and these relations. I find myself entangled with new lines that are braided with visceral, emplaced memories of this project.

Raising Spirit showed me that the research process is not always linear. As a graduate student, I was trained to have a detailed project outline that included clear research questions, a firm theoretical footing, and a sound methodological design. Every step of my doctoral project was premeditated in response to the questions I had set out to explore. Meetings with my supervisor were structured around questions of progress and timing: was I meeting the milestones we had so carefully plotted on the calendar? Given the community-based contexts I was working in (schools, specifically), there was the inevitability of needing *some* flexibility, but I appreciated having a roadmap or clear line that I could trace. Looking back, I see that this desire for structure was likely a reflection of my own insecurities as a new researcher, embarking on a project that felt, initially, insurmountable. A line to follow meant it would be difficult to get lost. In sharp contrast, Raising Spirit's research engagement was emergent. The process *asked me* to get lost: lost in data, in multimodality, in theory, in relations, and in body. In getting lost, I learned to dwell in overlapping uncertainties and to stop looking for straight pathways forward. I learned that being lost was often a good kind of trouble.

I came to my fellowship directly from graduate school. My role on Raising Spirit had me supervising graduate and undergraduate students from across a variety of disciplines, a role I'd never held before. I was tasked with managing a project with blurry outlines centered around relationships that were not mine in a place that was not my home. Raising Spirit quickly became about relation-building and networks of care. Amy and I shared an office space lovingly called 'the lair'. While we each had our own offices, we often chose to sit at a big table in the center of the space. Here, over copious cups of tea, we became fast friends. Amy and I were tasked with writing a grant application in a short amount of time. Looking back at our successful application, it strikes me that we had planted some emerging ideas, but still had many questions about where the project would go. 'What the hell is our research question?', we continually asked ourselves in the safety of the lair, while our supervisors were not present. Deciding to embark on a project together meant reconciling our disciplinary differences and relearning the 'rules' of research that I had internalized.

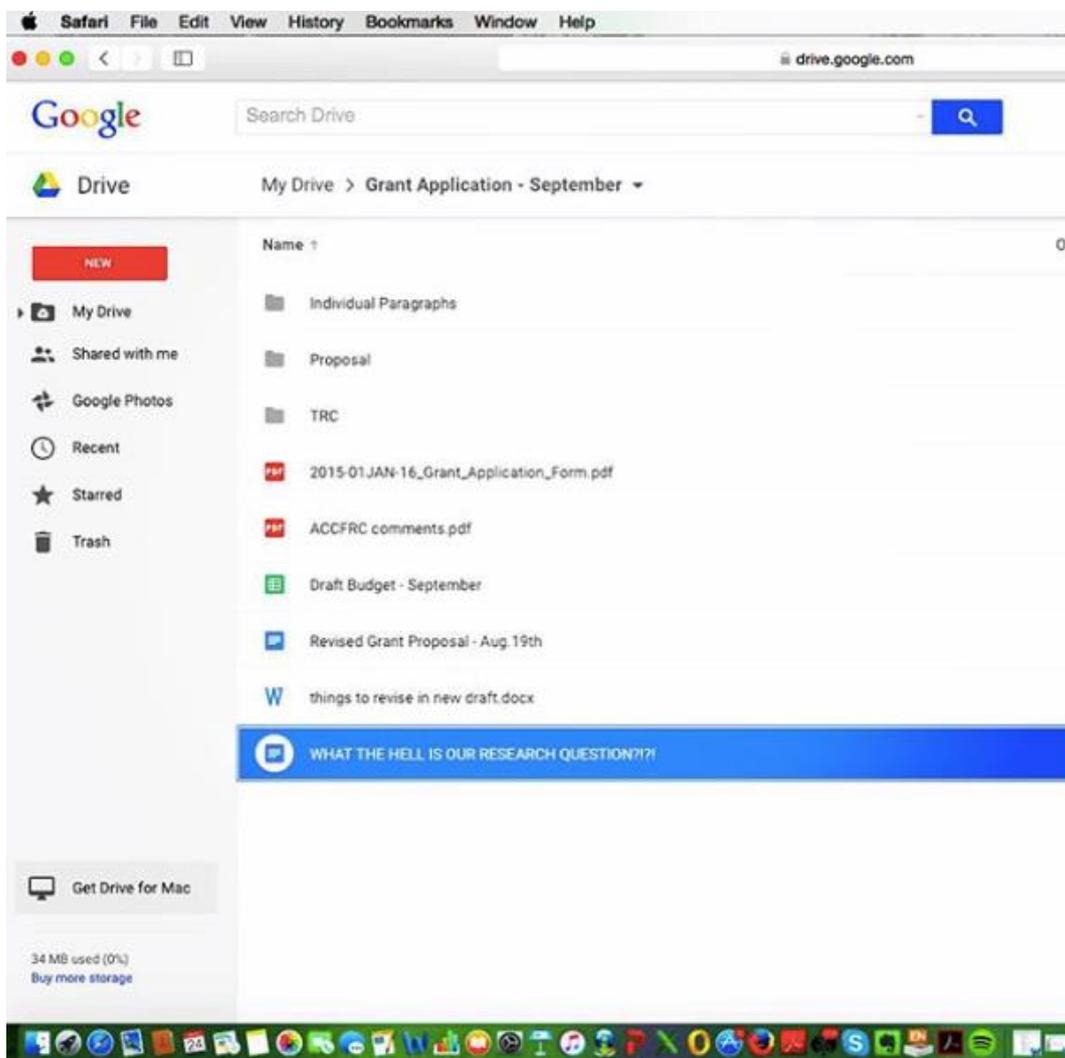


Figure 1: "What the hell is our research question?"

These troubles persisted even after our research assistants had been hired, and our van was cutting its way across the prairie toward our field sites. It turns out that we traced numerous lines of inquiry, down multiple winding paths. We often found ourselves lost. What began as a photo-elicitation project came to include walking methodologies, visual methods, interviews, and design studios. We followed traditional methodological approaches but also created new ways of engaging with community-members, young and old. Our data was produced through blog posts, photos, fieldnotes, artwork, written narratives, and oral stories. Years after the project ended, it is still impossible to disentangle the data, the relationships through which it was gathered, and the modes in which it was collected. Rather than trying to trace a through-line, however, we find ourselves dwelling in (and celebrating) the project's multi-layered, multimodal, multi-method complexities (St. Pierre, 2014). It would be a disservice to our process to simplify it, or to trace our steps on paper. I have come to understand that the knots we tied do not need to be *untied*, but rather understood as part of a messy, tangled whole. I am no longer troubled that our lines don't converge on a linear path.

Raising Spirit was framed around themes which resonated with my earlier work (place, land), but there were also differences that the project prompted me to wrestle with on a very personal level. I am a non-Indigenous educator of British descent. I grew up on traditional Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe Territories (South and Central Ontario, Canada) and lived in many places before moving to Treaty 7 for my fellowship. Raising Spirit lit a spark in that it *required* me to begin complicating my understandings of and relationships with land and identity. Raising Spirit pulled me out on the Land in new ways. We had long car-rides through the prairies into the foothills; we sat and listened to stories in knowledge keepers' backyards and homes; we picked berries and sweetgrass under a hot July sun. We were invited to climb Chief Mountain, a sacred site for the Blackfoot community. In these moments, slowly, my relationship with the land, with my research, and with my own history was being transformed. I was changed by the stories I heard of the Land as animate and sacred. In Raising Spirit, the land *itself* was 'a participant' that became a central part of the story our research told. As I moved through the experiences and unexpected challenges of the project, I became more attentive to my surroundings, and established a deeper understanding of Land relations.

As a scholar for whom place is central, I had to re-imagine my work. Drawing on the work of cultural geographer Doreen Massey (2005), I understood that place was dynamic, multiple, and imbued with story, but I had only ever considered the role of place for my participants' identities. Place came alive through their stories but was otherwise a stage where life played out. I began to acknowledge that place, from an Indigenous perspective, is the first teacher (Simpson, 2014) and that attending to place can offer guidance for good relations (Donald, 2016). I understand now that place is more than a *resource* for my projects and an indirect space for our experiences to unfold but instead is an *animate place* full of human and more-than-human relations (Basso, 1996; Mueller, 2018).

I was offered a job and given two weeks to move to a new, but nearby city and left this project suddenly without the opportunity to follow out more lines. I return now to attend to the transformative relations that continue to tie me to the data and the place. Paulette Regan (2010) writes about *unsettling the settler within*. What is required for reconciliation is for non-Indigenous peoples to disrupt what we know to be true, to examine our collective identity, and to "[connect] head, heart, and spirit in ways that value vulnerability and humility [to] enable us to accept harsh truths" (Regan, 2010, pp.237). Troubling my own

identity and prior work was unsettling: I am still wrestling with these questions and, as we move forward with this intentionally multimodal phase of Raising Spirit, I carry these troubles with me.

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**Dr. Erin Spring** is an Assistant Professor in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. Erin's research seeks to understand the ways in which young people make sense of their identities through reading, writing, and art. Her research projects are united thematically by a shared investment in stories and storytelling as a way of articulating identity development, with a particular focus on the influence of place. Her ongoing objective as a settler scholar is to collaborate with communities, including schools, to ask and answer questions that matter to them, facilitating social change, building capacity, and promoting student wellbeing.

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