

A Healing Wandern in How We Know: Methods of Inquiry

I'll begin with the center, the middle, and work my way out. The context: I was talking to my dad, midweek, post Brown Bag at the New York City Urban Field Station. The talk was titled *A Healing Wander: Connecting Urban Centers of Maple Nation*. I was staying at the [U.S. Forest Service Fort Totten Residential and Research Facility](#), a field lab and residential space to conduct research and network with scientists, practitioners, university partners, and facilities that focus on urban ecology. The Urban Field Station's mission is to improve quality of life in urban areas by conducting and supporting research about social-ecological situations and natural resource management—just up my alley for my PhD work in healing landscapes at the University of Minnesota in Natural Resource Science and Management.



Figure 1: Kate Flick outside the New York City Urban Field Station.

In this conversation with my dad, he was talking on the art of the wink, as I am later phrasing it. I forgot how we got there but he was talking about Geraldine, one of his housemates.

“You know, she’s 95 years old and sometimes her mind wanders off in left field, but a lot of times, you learn a lot too. She’ll tell you how things were darn near 100 year ago, or in the 60s, or 3 years ago. But you know what I like about Geraldine? When I sit down, she always gives me a wink. That’s how she begins each meal.”

What my dad was saying was that no matter how his day was going, that wink would draw him out (or in) and tell him to see things as they were—uncertain, out of control, and glorious. The certainty came in the form of a wink—that community connection. Resilience. What my dad offered in return was a listening and thoughtful ear. Reciprocity. Reciprocity = resilience and a fabric for the ever-existing process of healing.

In Maple Nation, Dr. Robin Kimmerer might chirrup in that it's the systems of responsibilities that serves as the glue to weaves us together, much like the sweetgrass braid she is asking us to engage with her in the book and practice of [Braiding Sweetgrass](#).

“What could different worldviews tell us about stewardship?” [Dr. Lindsay Campbell](#) asked as she wondered about the many identities of Maple Nation, New York City, and academic research disciplines. We often start from a zero-point epistemology in which the story starts with our worldview, and an often “western”-dominated ideology with its own baggage and assumptions that have built upon themselves since Aristotle started classifying things into binary this or that, true or untrue logic with a man-warrior cultural fabric. Yet what other relationships and possibilities could be?

It is this question that brought me to the Urban Field Station.

[Dr. Heather McMillen](#), tuning in early morning in Hawaii for the talk, commented that with her work in Hawaii, she has learned that the indigenous word there, *kuleana* (apologies for misspelling), encompasses both rights and responsibilities.

Even before that, while discussing education, sustainability, and climate change at a leadership meeting for a collaborative science education project, [Dr. Jerilyn Grignon](#) (one of my elder mentors and the first Menominee to get her PhD) said, “Communities must come together to change the way we produce knowledge.”

She was pointing to the intersection between justice, knowledge production, our relationship to our world, and the ensuing landscapes in the face of climate change. Moving into novel socioecological ecosystems will require critical reflection on this intersection because fundamentally, the products of knowledge landscapes will impact how society knows how to respond to climate change and how our landscape can respond to climate change. Delving into, and being deliberate about, the link between the environment and human actions (practices and values) is crucial in recognizing patterns of reciprocity, sustainability, health, and equity (Kimmerer 2013). Complex systems science, traditional ecological knowledges, and other ways of knowing reveal a place-based memory—both biophysical and social—of interconnectivity and change (Kimmerer 2012, Filotas et al 2014). If we listen, this memory can offer powerful lessons about healing our often broken or unhealthy relationships to the world, as well as provide instructional examples for “being” in the past, present, and future. If we open the door to cross-cultural contexts and diverse contributions to knowledge production, we may unearth alternative ways of asking questions about, understanding, and relating to our world (Hassel 2014)

In trying to think about healing as a broader metaphor for our relationships to the world, Cowell et al. 2009 say that it is a process. The process requires us to identify who the patient is, to unearth the deeper causes of “wound” rather than treating symptoms, and to examine the nature of health we are seeking.

“Uncritically used, the word may lead us to assume that ideal of health of an ecosystem, a species, a community, or a culture can be easily determined. In fact, this is often what happens when the word is not used. Problems, their causes, and their solutions tend to be taken for granted, and the participants then immediately plunge into the worst kind of political power struggles to see who can successfully impose “their” solution. If we use the concept of healing in its most productive sense, however, we will recognize that it demands that we confront openly our initial underlying assumptions about what we are really trying to achieve in addressing the problem in question. The most productive uses of the term force us to clarify our goals.”

My dad knows something about this healing process. He’s been doing it the past year and in this conversation, he took a stab at communicating the deep wound, rather than symptoms, “You break down those lines of communication and you start building fences around yourself. You look back and you wonder how you got there...but it’s a lot easier to build that fence than it is to take it down.”

[Dr. Erika Svendsen](#) wondered aloud, “What does reciprocity look like, especially in the **not** good times? What keeps us together?”

What could healing landscapes be to glue us together in all manners of being? Ingredients so far: resilience, reciprocity, clarification of goals?

In the beginning of the voyage, I was armed with sweetgrass from the [University of Minnesota Native Medicine Gardens](#), soil collected from a memory of maples in Minneapolis on Nicollet Island (a former sugar bush camp, the records tell us), and a maple leaf. I collected the same in New York City. I wandered over to NYC to question “how we know” in the context of urban centers of Maple Nation, particularly NYC and the Twin Cities. During the talk, my “weapons” paid off. I caught a few of the gathered scientists sniffing the soil, perhaps remembering the things we had forgotten to remember. In this translation of nationhood bounded by soil and leaves, rather than geopolitical lines, we are offered the opportunity to redefine our relationship to world, our governance structure for being and the boundaries in which we define ourselves.

In the [Landscapes of Resilience](#) project in Far Rockaway, Project Coordinator Renae Reynolds is working on deconstructing some of the walls that have built up over time too. In her landscape, it could begin as one of those jokes that parcels people into distinct boxes, walking into a bar. A white entrepreneur looking for more land, a Latino Eco-hipster whose name means “bull” and resembles a Ferdinand the Bull “stop and smell the flowers” ethic in charge of

a healing garden, and a powerful lady of color from NYC housing wondering when the next workshop on winterizing will be and when they're going to get that pergola up all go into a bar...But in Renae's world, it's green nodes that the people could walk into. It is a concept she is thinking through lately. Green nodes popping up as people organize to shape their future through the past and present in a community vulnerable to climate changes—social, ecological cultural, economic. Most of the residents have been experiencing these changes for some time now.

Could the green nodes help us experience change as healing rather than experiencing change as another relationship of dominion and control, displacement—something I'm beginning to see as important piece of healing landscape work.

Renae and I were driving back to the bus stop after a wander with this suite of folks in Far Rockaway. "They're all kind of doing the same thing," I noted.

"Yeah, they might not see it at first, the commonalities. But these green nodes could be the space to bring them together," Renae replied.

Walls and sand bags probably weren't going to engineer success in controlling climatic changes; but perhaps the green nodes of community, stewardship, and resilience just might shift towards experiencing the next round of changes as a healing process, rather than a crisis mode and vulnerable process.



Figure 2 Edgemere Farm in Far Rockaway



Figure 3 The Healing Garden at Far Rock Farm



Figure 4 One of many community garden plot—each with their own character—at New York City Housing Beach 41st Street Houses

I've been doing a little investigating into our current state of affairs in terms of our relationship to world and the social constructs around how we currently form many of our relationships in abuse and exploitation. The Wandern stems from an opportunity that arose to study forest ecology and management in Freiburg, Germany as a master's student several years ago. The German area is part of my heritage and the Black Forest or Schwarzwald also sits outside Freiburg, which is an old forest landscape that holds many memories. A German Mann, oder Kollagen, I met there has since written a book called [A Critique of Silviculture: Managing for Complexity](#). In it, he details land management of forested landscapes through European and American historical lens to understand some of the flaws in our approach and how to shift towards a complex, rather than certain, world. He explicitly links major social and cultural philosophical shifts to the treatment of the landscape as well as to the decision making tools, practices, and relationships to being in it—the most recent and fundamental of which was tied to economic liberalism combined with Newtonian calculus and later industrialism circa the late 17th and 18th centuries. This philosophy assumes linearity, private self-interest, free trade, and capitalism as goals and removed the oral and place-based traditions from the landscape in favor of a standardized school of thought.

“Forestry was rather slow to adopt economic liberalism compared to other industries. But when it did, the view of the role of economics in the ownership of forests changed dramatically. The forest had previously been viewed primarily as a stable component of

a regional economy and employment base. Management decisions were applied in this context. With the adoption of economic liberalism in the 19th century, came the notion that the purpose of forests was to maximize profits for landowners. This was a substantial shift in thinking and its influence on forestry research and management activities cannot be underestimated. To apply the notion of profit maximization in forestry requires new concepts and decision-making tools. (p. 5-6).

Up sprouted schools (the first of which was university of Freiburg in Germany in 1792) to institute and standardize these values, which were exported without any place-based context to the United States and other places. Things like the Normalwald or normal forest (1826) became an ideal, which sought the goal of even-aged fully stocked stands with balanced age class distribution. This meant standardizing species mix, site qualities, tree densities, and qualities. Tools that emerged and which still influence most forestry today are inventory and planning, species mixtures and monocultures, stand and rotation, regeneration, thinning, as expressed through equations. The goal: maximize economic productivity in a linear mathematical fashion. This management paradigm left out a lot of things and doesn't do well with uncertainty, complexity, and diversity—or as my dad said, uncertain, out of control, and glorious. It is rooted in dominion and control over relationships that try to box the forests' identities into a Normalwald. What if we intentioned healing as our management paradigm, or mode for operation, letting go of the control and embracing uncertainty, letting things (interpreted loosely to be spanning scales) be who they are.



Figure 5 Example of Normalwald or Normal forest inherited from traditional forestry technique.s

We have built a lot of walls around ourselves, and our relationships to the world, so it's really hard to see what could be. In a sense, most of us have all become calibrated in a western epistemology since this is the epistemology that dominates our educational settings. It wasn't until I had an opportunity to work with the Menominee Nation of Wisconsin at the [College of Menominee Nation's Sustainable Development Institute](#), that I was gifted a lens which approaches our relationship to world differently. There in Wisconsin near the place where their origin story emerges, and in which the Menominee have maintained sovereignty for thousands of years, they have the most beautiful forest that supports probably thousands of different species, and nurtures a connection between Grandmother Earth and people, but also takes from the landscape. They have a mill and cutting operation that has cut over the forest 2.5 times at least since 1850 or so when written records began (let me assure the oral traditions go back much further ago to glacial times). But it is so distinct, you can clearly see the forest and its borders from geo-satellite aerial views.

In the [POSOH project](#) (Hello in Menominee and Place-Based Opportunities for Sustainable Outcomes and High Hopes) with which I was working, we asked together the question of what makes the Menominee forest unique, and the resounding consensus was Netaenawemakenuk – all my relations. Within it are ideas of diversity, complexity, and valuation for all as the unique being they be.



Figure 6 Netaenawemakanak All My Relations Grade 7 POSOH cover art by Anthony Gauthier.

This view leads us to different questions. The questions do not revolve around how we can manage or control the land, but how can we listen to her and what she is telling us. In a recent correspondence with my Elder mentor, writer, and philosopher Jeff Paemapameh Grignon, this cultural fabric becomes clear. He is the person, as Forest Development Forester, in charge of the future forest at Menominee Tribal Enterprises and has been observing the forest his whole

life. Like a good learner, he takes a turn describing Grandmother Earth, summarizes, and then asks:

So Kate, I would be interested in how you would describe Grandmother Earth? In my eyes and heart, she is very much a beautiful and passionate, self-assured Lady; I'm finally getting to know."

A tough question that I have not answered yet, but hope to work on. When we accept everyone (human and non-human at multiple scales) as a unique person with their own worldview perhaps then we gain some traction in shifting how we know. How do we learn to listen enough to hear the forgotten whispers and insert them into the memorying process?

Again, Robin's voice comes to mind. She encourages us to smell sweetgrass and in doing so, sweetgrass will remind us to remember things we didn't know we had forgotten. She asks us to think about our relationship between us and world, and the stewardship we take in those relationships. How can we braid together if we don't even know that there is a strand waiting for us? Whose identities are expressed in our relationship to world and whose are not? What does this tell us about power and who has it?

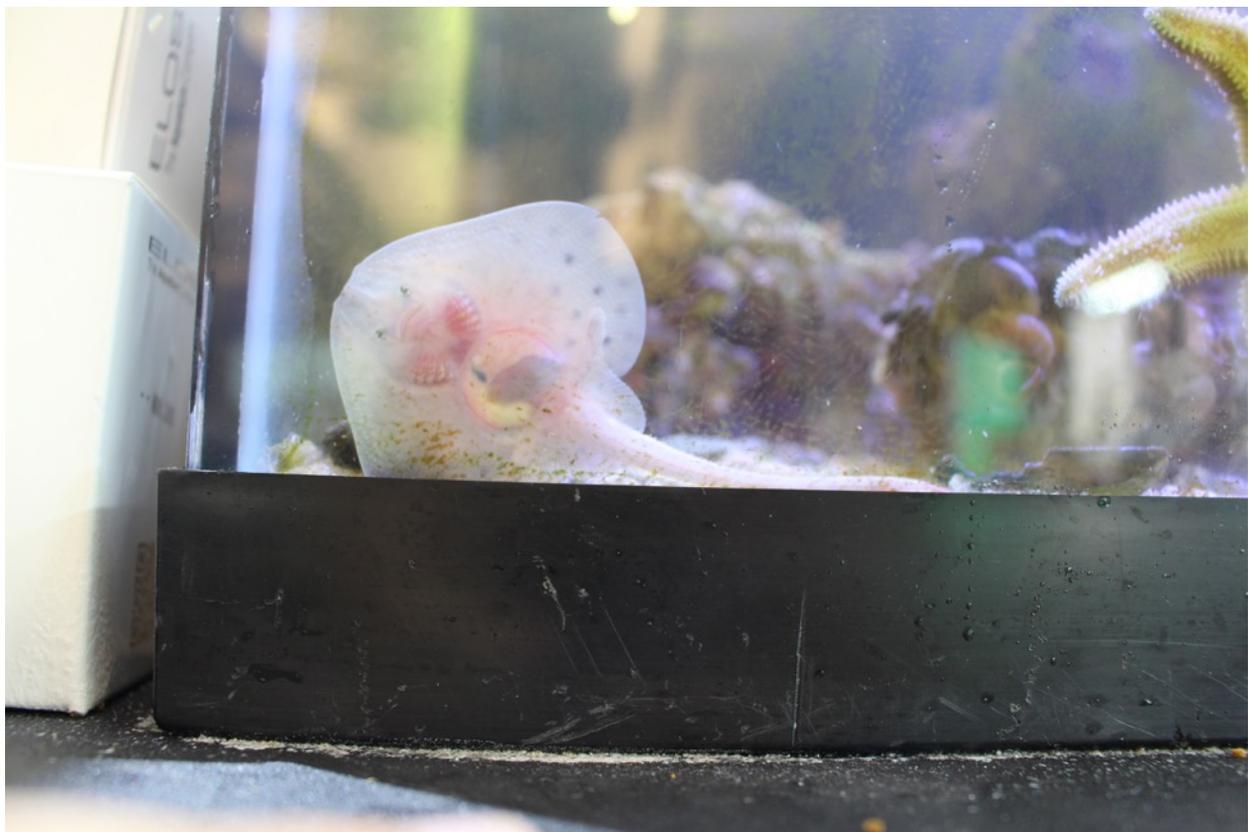


Figure 7 A baby manta ray at the Nature and Technology Lab inspiring artists and scientists alike.

I found in the [Nature and Technology Lab](#) at the New School of Design that they were breaking down some of those categories omnipresent in academia. The lab began in 2011 as a brainchild of Suzanne Anker. It represents a place where scientific tools and techniques become tools and techniques in art practice, the Lab is the result of many people's expertise, research and sustained effort. Andrew Joseph Cziraki, a current art student, is wondering about the fabric of human existence. In his project, he collects Holy Water from local churches and then images them in various forms to illuminate their character. "I think it's trying to think about fundamental human-environment-world constructs," he says, "For example, what is pure?" he continues pointing to the sample bottles and dead skin that layers the bottom from human hands interacting with the holy. It represents a kind of togetherness, rather than separation, between us and world, a fusion of social-biophysical. One of his partners in crime, plant geneticist and lab manager Sebastian Cocioba, is one of those people you can just keep asking 'why' to and he'll keep having answers about how life might be working. "Check this out," he says, as he projects [The Inner Life of a Cell](#) video that animates the formation of life on a cellular level, describing in detail each of those cell parts that we learn about in high school biology but don't really understand. "It is an emergent and complex process. Stuff out of stuff. There is no control. It's a bumping together and odds of probability. Form to function." In the lab they are working on various projects that show how these two "disciplines" sharing the creative inquiry process can come together in another form to function.

Perhaps in some sort of conclusion (to be continued) in this Wandern, this kind of value shift requires us to commit to place and the things in our community in order to have a different sort of glue and fabric for existence. We live in a world of moments and flaming passion which quickly dissolve into the next emergency, disconnecting us from a commitment to community and place. While accompanying [Dr. Michelle Johnson](#) and Dr. Lindsay Campbell on the [NYC TreesCount!2015](#), Lindsay described how the process of identifying trees helps us to connect with them, know who is there, and in what state they are through an easy-to-use web-based application.



Figure 8 U.S. Forest Service Researchers Dr.'s Michelle Johnson and Lindsay Campbell inputting tree data into NYC Tree Count in Queens.

“Communities themselves take charge of the process. It’s an interesting citizen science project where the local organizations that are already existing sign up to take care of different blocks.” Lindsay says.

As we approached one particular tree, it might have been a silver maple, *Acer saccharinum*, Dr. Michelle Johnson, immediately rattled off who the tree was. “How do you know?” Lindsay asked. Dr. Michelle Johnson replied, “I just do.” Did she do it with a wink?

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