

## AN ARTS-BASED CURRICULUM ENCOUNTER: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE ON THIS LAND?

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**ABSTRACT.** Our arts-based curriculum encounter occurred in a graduate course on arts-based research methods. For a class project we engaged in an inquiry on the question: “What does it mean to live on this land?” which we explored through various arts-based activities. The question challenged us to think deeply about our relationship with and responsibilities to the land we occupy. The inquiry raised for us and, in various ways, implicated us in issues around geographical settings, historical contexts, colonization and nationhood, relations as/with Indigenous peoples, Indigenous ways of knowing, relations with the natural environment, exploitation of the land, the environmental crisis, and our own family histories and personal journeys. In this paper, we share the reflective writings of four inquiry participants interspersed with some images from our work together.

### RENCONTRE DANS UN PROGRAMME BASÉ SUR LES ARTS : QUE SIGNIFIE VIVRE SUR CE TERRITOIRE?

**RÉSUMÉ.** Notre rencontre au cœur d’un programme basé sur les arts s’est produite dans un cours de deuxième cycle en méthodologie de recherche axée sur les arts. Dans le cadre d’un projet de classe, nous nous sommes posées la question « Que signifie vivre sur cette terre? », puis l’avons explorée dans le contexte d’une variété d’activités liées aux arts. Cette interrogation nous a amenées à approfondir notre relation avec et nos responsabilités face au territoire que nous occupons. Notre recherche nous a amenées à nous questionner et à nous impliquer de diverses manières sur des problématiques en lien avec des lieux géographiques, des contextes historiques, les concepts de colonisation et de nationalité, les relations en tant que et avec les autochtones, les principes autochtones d’être et de savoir, les relations avec l’environnement, l’exploitation de la terre, la crise environnementale ainsi que nos histoires familiales et cheminement personnel respectifs. Dans cet article, nous partageons les réflexions de quatre participants à la recherche, en les entrecoupant d’images de notre collaboration.

## OUR ARTS-BASED INQUIRY

Our arts-based curriculum encounter occurred while on Treaty 6 territory in what is known as Edmonton at the University of Alberta.<sup>1</sup> In support of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) calls to action – specifically in relation to the call for Education for Reconciliation around “building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect” (p. 7), in a graduate course on arts-based research methods, we engaged in an inquiry on a question posed by Indigenous scholar Dr. Dwayne Donald: What does it mean to live on this land? The question challenged us to think deeply about our relationship with and responsibilities to the land we occupy.

The inquiry raised for us and in various ways implicated us in issues around geographical settings, historical contexts, colonization and nationhood, relations as/with Indigenous peoples, Indigenous ways of knowing, relations with the natural environment, exploitation of the land, the environmental crisis, our own family histories and personal journeys. To explore the question, we individually and collaboratively engaged in various arts-based activities including collaging, writing and movement. Dr. Donald also took us for a walk in the North Saskatchewan River valley near the University. His walk, which he frequently offers to groups, involves visits to specific sites in the valley and storytelling about the historical significance of the places.



FIGURE 1. *River Valley Walk* by Trish Jagger

Many of our creations for the inquiry responded to that walk. The culmination of the inquiry was a collection of our work in the form of an altered book.<sup>2</sup> What follows are reflective writings by three students in the course and the instructor, interspersed with some of the images from the altered book we created.

*Diane: All my relations*

In response to the prompt: “What does it mean to live on this land?” I am beginning to try to understand the three words “All My Relations.” I photographed some native plants in the river valley near the University and created a photo collage. My plant relations included: blue flax, sage, giant rye, raspberry, highbush cranberry, choke cherry, saskatoon berry, rose, dogwood, birch, blue spruce, mountain ash, cottonwood, wolf willow. That was the start of my inquiry.



FIGURE 2. *All My Relations* by Diane Conrad

I express my appreciation of nature through hiking, camping, canoeing, gardening, bird-watching, harvesting wild plants, and picking berries. Engaged in these activities, out in nature, I am content. Sensitive to the effects of my existence on the environment, I make environmentally consciousness gestures in my day-to-day life: I recycle, compost, don't drive a car, keep my consumption in check. I understand that I am dependent on the land for my survival. With the environment at risk, I mourn for the survival of generations to come. I have not, until recently, thought of the land and its inhabitants as my relations. How might such understanding of relatedness change things?

I am trying to understand the land as a living, sentient entity with materiality, affect, and memory, and my existence within an ecological consciousness. In contradiction to my Western education, I am grappling to understand that I am not the site of knowledge, rather, knowledge is in the energy waves that flow through everything and have done so since primordial times (Little Bear in Hill, 2008). Spirit flows through me as it does through the rocks and trees. I need to nurture my relationship with the land in order to understand its wisdom. As Leroy Little Bear stated, “only when the rocks get to know you will they tell you their story” (Hill, 2008, p. 42).

Enmeshed with the land, I have obligations. What does it mean to honour sacred relations in everything I do? Sheridan and Longboat (2006) stated, “where one is has everything to do with who one is” (p. 369). How am I composed of the place I inhabit? How does the land affect how I think? How do I exist in inter-dependence with the more-than-human inhabitants, with the memory of all those relations who have ever been and in anticipation of all those yet to come? How should I allow the land and its inhabitants to instruct me in my way of living here? How should I uphold my obligation to communicate appreciation with the sentient landscape around me and think with the intelligences of the land? What ceremonies can I authentically perform to respectfully renew the conditions of my co-existence?

I am burdened with the realization that the worldview into which I’ve been educated is hostile to the land and is not easily overhauled. How do I unlearn destructive habits of thought and repair the way I relate to the land through my thoughts and deeds? More than actions or gestures, I seek meaning in my way of being. How do I change my way of being in the world? How do I make this ontological shift?

As I write, I see, on my office floor atop a stack of papers, a rock that I have been neglecting and which I picked up twenty years ago while camping at Fossil Lake, Northwest Territories. That I collected this rock as a curiosity and utilized it as a paperweight is evidence of my exploitative worldview. This ancestor must have incredible knowledge of the land from perhaps long before humans joined the consciousness. It lived some part of its life, possibly on the bed of some ancient lake, in close relation to some other entity – an anemone, coral or barnacle, that left impressions of itself indelibly pocked on its surface. What stories could this ancestor rock tell? Over the coming years, I will endeavor to come to know this ancestor better; perhaps, eventually, it may tell me its stories.

### *Trish: Negotiating boundaries*

My ancestors traversed oceans in search of new homes. Today my family is scattered across nations. What does it mean to live on this land? It means living in the in-between spaces of somewhere and nowhere.

“I am enmeshed in a series of relationships that I depend on for my survival.” These words spoken by Dr. Donald (personal communication, October 26, 2016) have taken residence within me, pulling me to a wide-awakeness of the complexities of my existence. Therefore, I live “at a crossing point of too many social and cultural forces” with the realization that I “am forever on my way. [And that] my identity has to be perceived as multiple, [if I am to] strive towards some coherent notion of what is humane and decent and just” (Ng-A-Fook, 2014, p. 1).

As I look down at the ground beneath my feet, I find myself struggling to sort through these multiplicities, striving to locate myself amidst a cacophony of voices – past, present, and future, which invite / request / demand that I stop and listen. Voices that travel in the wind as I walk through the suburban winter landscape I currently call home and which dwell within me wherever I may travel, often shaking my restless soul to wandering, both mentally and physically, in search of the land to which I belong.

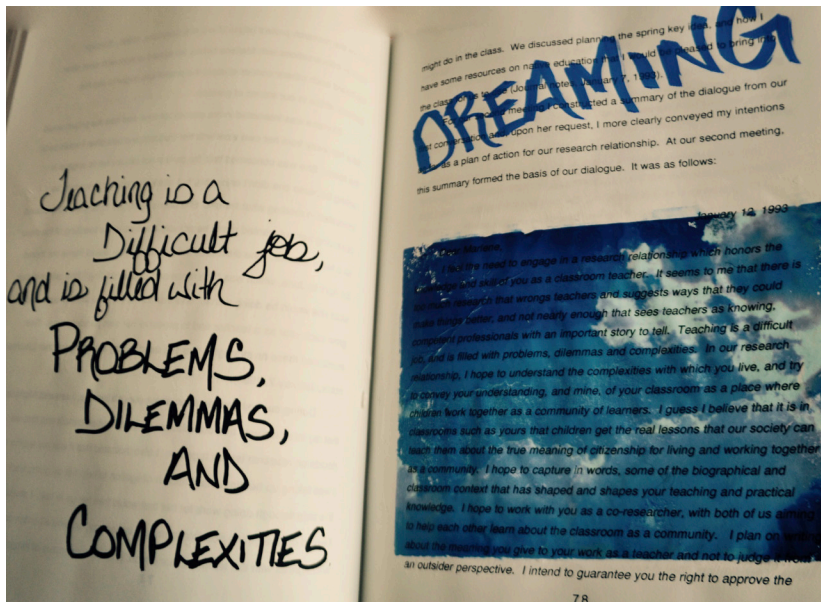


FIGURE 3. *Dreaming* by Trish Jagger

Perhaps it is my fate to belong to no place, and that rightly so, no place shall belong to me. England, Scotland, Canada, the United States, France, Costa Rica, Germany, Jamaica...The nations of my ancestry are vast and diverse. Some of which were lived on as conquerors and colonizers, others which they were driven from, fleeing persecution, daring to dream of new places of possibility for their families, their futures. I wonder if they knew of the scars those dreams might lead to for others. I wonder if they cared.

In her own quest to answer the question, “Where am I from?” Emily Baillin (2012) wrote:

Where I’m from doesn’t always feel like how “where I’m from” should feel  
...and that’s hard, it’s complicated.

I pull the bandana from my eyes,  
and wait for my pupils to adjust.

I am from blurry lines.

And while I will not claim to reclaim borderlands, I will say I negotiate boundaries.

You see, I’m working to strengthen this HYBRIDIZED identity of mine –  
to make sense of my own contradictions and confusions. (para. 4)

I too negotiate boundaries, both those that lie within me, embedded through the years, and those external to me that can at once both confine and provide. Tied to the nation in which I was born, a nation, which too seeks to understand its identity; but how often we both forget, you have to let go of what was, so you can become what will be.

Perhaps I am like water: Elusive, impossible to hold. Belonging to no one nation or piece of land, destined to move from shore to shore, gathering sediment, refuse, stories. Stories that smash against each other at times, swirling together in a *métissage* of memory, history, and experience, before crashing on to another distant shore, weaving together my life with those I meet along the way.

The first time I placed my feet in the ocean, I felt peace. The irony of this is not lost on me, a child of the prairies who grew up in a thriving metropolis, benefitting from a worldview rooted in taking whatever we could from the land, to prosper, to thrive. In my youth, I did not consciously know better; I choose to believe that my parents did not either. Now we know. Now we must do better.

I cannot erase what has been. I cannot give back what was taken, and I cannot deny that I am grateful for all that I have been given in this life. These are my confusions and contradictions.

My yoga practice has taught me to ground down to the land on which I stand, reminding me to embrace life and breathe in each moment. As the four corners of my feet grip the earth, energy rises vibrating through muscle, bone, and tissue, limbs reaching, grasping for the sky, greeting all my relations, my living and lost loved ones. They whisper to me, as I’m swaying...searching...dreaming. I pull my hands down into silent prayer, and hold tight to their mistakes and lost dreams, their laughter and tears, telling me I must continue to search for ways to live a life that acknowledges the gifts I have been granted.

Reflecting back to Dr. Donald's words, "I am enmeshed in a series of relationships that I depend on for my survival..." I think of this, as I clasp my love's hand and dare to look forward to the journey ahead, grateful that I have landed on this unexpected shore. I lay my head against his chest so I can listen to his heartbeat, hypnotizing me like the sound of gentle waves. It sings to me I have found safe-haven, a place in which to dwell if only for a moment amidst the cacophony and confusion, the contradictions and confusions. Neither tarnished by past transgressions, nor located in some vague, imagined future.

In this space of stillness, in-between where I've been and where I'm going, I am reminded of Michael Ondaatje's (1992) words:

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all of this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography – to be marked by nature, not just label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste and experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. (p. 261)

### *Tori: Mapping acknowledgement*

When I think of what it means to live on this land, I think of the relationship between the land and its occupants. As humans, the land constructs our identities and shapes our histories. Part of living out such history has brought us a practice of navigating and building. Settlers build things, such as city towers that become landmarks on maps that people travel to and take photographs to post to acknowledge *they* have been there.

Perhaps we need to reverse the order and think about the land first and who has stood in this place before – look at its value from multiple perspectives. We need to navigate our way through different origin stories and recognize their contributions. With these acknowledgements, we must make informed choices about what and how we build; understanding *what* we construct can both add and take away, depending on one's perspective. Perspectives that take the land into consideration first can be passed on through Indigenous practices and ways of knowing, or settlers can embrace these values through hybrid identities.

For many Indigenous and other Canadian peoples, a sustainable approach is not a novel idea, but rather a cornerstone at the root of belief and practice. Yet, this crucial way of thinking can get lost in a louder narrative – not only heard in schools, but also visualized through the geographic maps that are commonly used to represent our land. Every map tells a story.

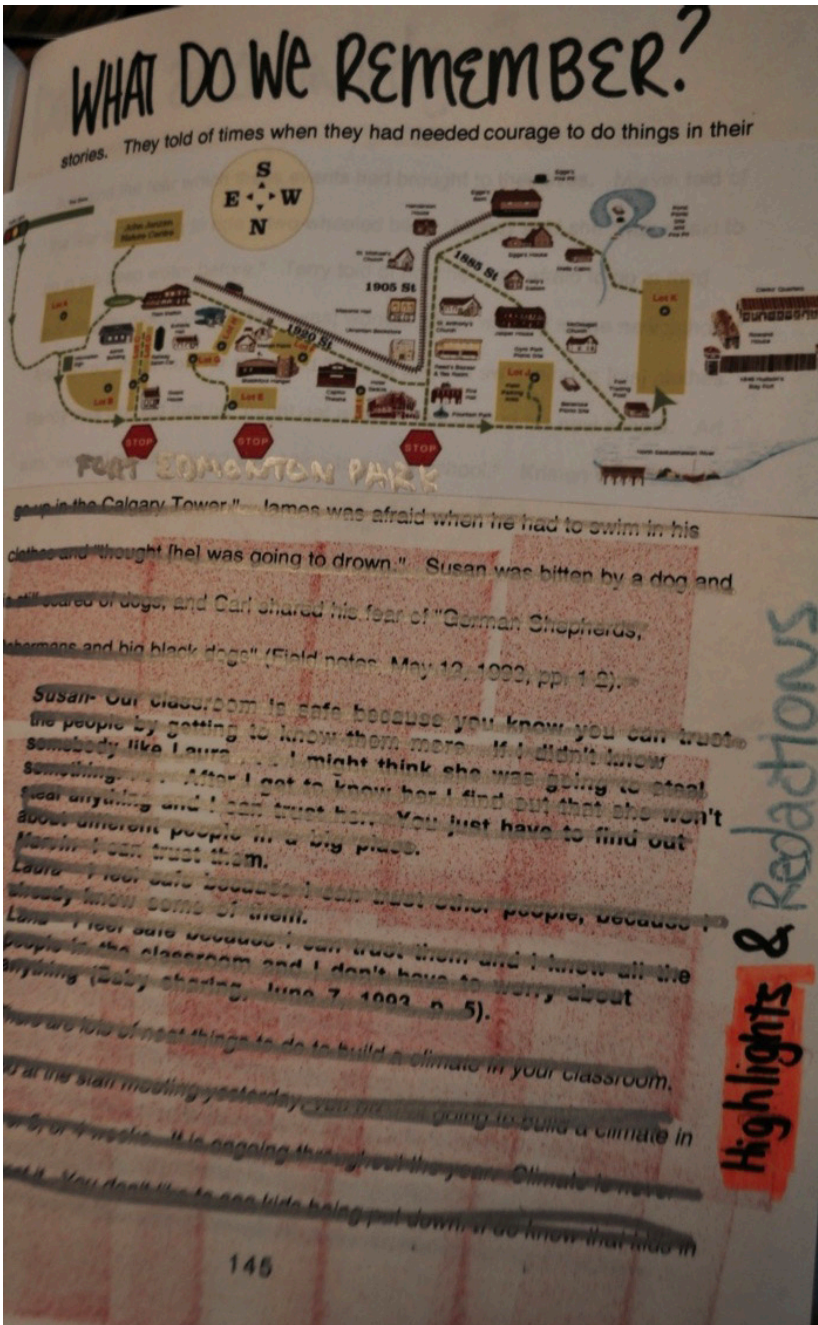


FIGURE 4. What Do We Remember? by Tori Bleeks



Maps are subjective as are other forms of visual art. Silences within popular stories are often echoed by what we choose to exclude from popular maps.<sup>3</sup> We become so familiar with some maps that we believe in them and passively accept the stories they tell. Maps, such as road maps and those for classrooms, are commodified and sold. As consumers, we can inadvertently buy into these stories. If we think about alternate, or lesser-known maps, we may be able to question what we believe.

I think about which maps we commonly see, what is marked down in their legends, and how what is left off is forgotten, not passed on in legends to future generations. What might be different if treaty outlines were as familiar as provincial borders on Canadian maps? If we have a defamiliarizing experience with something we normally recognize and believe in, can we gain a new perspective? Is it enough to promote an ontological shift?

I reflect on the ongoing practices of those with different perspectives living on the same land. Rather than negotiating harmony, colonization has been violent, unjust, and traumatizing. Tragedy strikes in times of reconciliation as power and politics trump what may be best for the living, breathing land itself. Injustice continues with the Ktunaxa Nation in British Columbia (Bakht & Collins, 2017) and in North Dakota with Standing Rock (Mufson & Eilperin, 2017). This American dispute remains important given we are only divided by a border drawn on a map of what is Turtle Island. Now, more than ever, the Canadian-American border represents a distinction between two countries that are politically carving spaces with different narratives regarding *who* is allowed to live on certain lands. In 2017, many individuals made new trails on foot to Emerson, Manitoba and Hemmingford, Quebec (Markusoff, 2017; Nuttall, 2017). As these travellers cross into Canada, I wonder how their own stories have encouraged appreciation of the land they have risked their lives to reach, and how their narratives will influence how they navigate and build their lives.

Perhaps the newcomers to Canada, with hybrid identities shaped by their first-hand experiences and marked by social injustices, can find common ground with those who were here first and endured exploitation. I believe there is room to hope we can negotiate harmony because this land, though deeply eroded with stories that scar, can still, at its core, care and provide for all its visitors, so long as we respect it.

**Sarah: *It means...everything***

What does it mean to live on this land?

It means...remembering.

It means...remembering how they told us we were Indians...how they told us we were heathens...how they told us we were uncivilized.

It means...remembering how they outlawed our ceremonies, our potlatches, our sundances, our sweatlodges, our dance, our song, our drum.

It means...remembering how they outlawed our dress, our regalia, our beadwork, our quillwork, our basketry, our creative expressiveness.

It means...remembering how they took our parents, our kohkoms and moshoms, our chapans and beat them, starved them, cut their spirits into little pieces and sent them back into the world, the walking wounded.

It means...remembering those who hid their children and kept our laws, our ceremonies, our sacred bundles, our languages alive and thriving.

It means...remembering the old ones who signed treaty...remembering how they did so in prayer and ceremony...how they did so with the express purpose of preserving the land and our ways for an eternity.

It means...remembering that the old ones prayed for my existence and that of my children and grandchildren, their children and grandchildren.

It means...remembering how Nohkom used to send me out with an ice cream pail, every day, during picking season to gather the blueberries, strawberries, and saskatoons growing wild.

It means...remembering how Nohkom would let me sit on the ground at her feet as she painstakingly threaded bead after bead into a pair of deer hide moccasins.

It means...remembering walking behind Nohkom as she checked her traplines, singing the old songs as she tramped through the bush.

It means...reclaiming.

It means...reclaiming the language stolen from me through listening closely to my Elders prayers.

It means...reclaiming the ceremonies stolen from me by taking every opportunity to sit close to the earth in communion with my Creator.

It means...reclaiming the vast creativeness of our clothes, our songs, our dance, our drum, our stories.

It means...reclaiming the practice of waking with the sun to give thanks to the Creator.

It means reclaiming our ways of knowing, our ways of doing, and our ways of being in this world.

It means...resisting

It means...resisting pipelines, which snake through our lands, poisoning our waters, putting everything that matters at risk.

It means...resisting government laws and policies, which would seek to further threaten our languages and our cultures and our lands.

It means...resisting education practices that strip us of who we were meant to be.

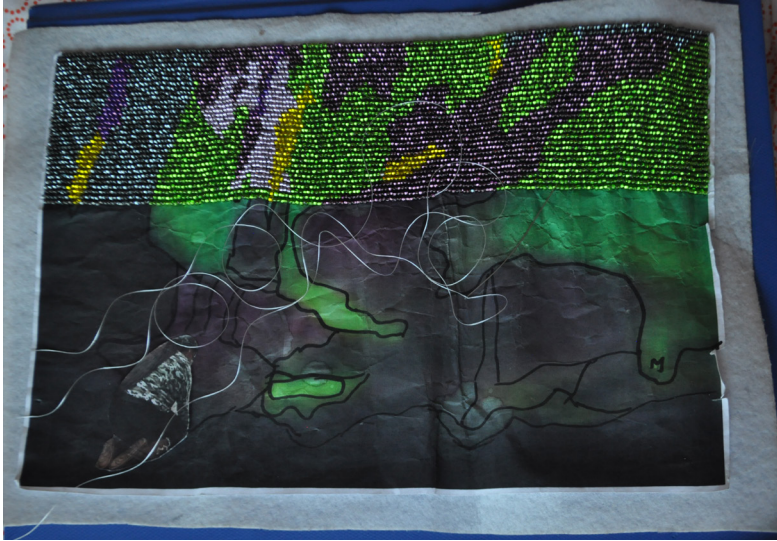


FIGURE 5. *The Ancestors* by Sarah Auger

It means...resisting anything and everything that threatens our existence as Nehiyawak, as Cree people, for the sake of the generations to come.

It means...always living conscious, intentional, and purposeful lives.

It means...reminding my grandbaby everyday how smart, courageous, beautiful, and precious she is.

It means...being a good ancestor.

My ancestors' blood and bones are buried deep in this land...their hopes, dreams, and memories are carried along the waters digging trenches into the riverbanks of my place.

My ancestors dance through the night sky, their radiance transmitting a brilliant evanescence, forever fading...forever present.

The land holds our memories.

The land tells our stories.

The land is my kin.

Hawaiian scholar Manulani Aluli-Meyer (personal communication, February 1, 2017) recently asked me, how does thinking about the land inform your work...Then she gave me the answer...everything. She said that land is at the centre of everything.

Kohkom...What does it mean to live on this land?

Babygirl...It means...everything.

## OUR JOURNEYS TOWARD UNDERSTANDING

What does it mean to live on this land? In our class inquiry, individuals interpreted the question in different ways; responses were as varied as the individuals responding. Each response was deeply personal, grounded in an encounter with who we are in relation to the land we inhabit. Our responses depended on our individual locations and relationships with place and the natural environment, our individual stories about who we are, how we came to be here, the places we and/or our ancestors have been, how we have learned to understand where we are, where we belong, and where we are on our journeys toward understanding. Our collective story is one of individual paths across time and place towards understanding. For those whose ancestors are Indigenous to here, the knowledge of land is an inheritance. Like our walk with Dr. Donald, our journeys meander, pause to reflect, take in new insights, and push on.

The arts-based processes we undertook individually and collectively helped us to reflect upon and articulate the paths that we are exploring, questioning, and navigating, or remembering, reclaiming, and resisting – the routes that have got us to here and will now carry us forward in closer relationship with one another and with the land we have in common. The process involved listening – to ancestors, to nature, to the world around us – and gave us opportunities to listen to one another. It helped us to remember the importance of attending to, of walking alongside, and hearing others' stories, to quiet our own voices and thoughts in order to honour those of others and to listen to the land around us. The story presented herein, then, is one of reconciliation with each other, with the land, our ancestors, and ourselves.

## NOTES

1. We would like to acknowledge other students who participated in the arts-based inquiry: Santoshi Robertson-Davis, Joëlle Prefontaine, Brad Neczyk, Christine Valentine, Allison Sivak, Bronwyn Sneffjella, Mariel Day, Lebo Disele, Mandy Hollands Ish, Stacey Murchison. We would also like to thank Dr. Dwayne Donald for his contribution to our inquiry.
2. An altered book is an art-form which transforms an existing book using various mixed-media (writing, drawing, cutting, folding, collage, etc.) from its original form to a new form with a new appearance and purpose (see Cobb & Negash, 2010).
3. The Mercator projection is a commonly used world map, which physically distorts the proportional sizes of countries and continents. There are many lesser-known equal-area map projections – including the Gall-Peters projection, which aim to provide a more physically accurate cartographic depiction (Barney, 2014).

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