



# Boreal Plants That Enchant

## A Lively Ethnography of *Sakâwiyiniwak* (Northern Bush Cree) Multispecies Kinship Obligations

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**Abstract** This article describes moments of plant-induced enchantment during community-based environmental monitoring and ethnographic research in Treaty No. 8 *sakâwiyiniwak* territories. These multispecies ethnographic encounters while collaborating with Elders and friends from Fort McKay First Nation and Bigstone Cree Nation describe how *sakâwiyiniwak* ecological care is rooted in kinship. Moments of enchantment, or intense moments of noticing and “plant-thinking,” inspire new appreciation of the boreal forest and the many familiar plants that grow within it, illuminating the magic of muskeg tea, frog’s pants, and aspen. Written in the style of lively ethnography, this article focuses on plants of *sakâwiyiniwak* ceremonial, nutritional, and medicinal use. These plants are often overlooked or are described as nuisance weeds, despite being indigenous plants, by settlers whose decisions and natural resource extraction activities have a direct effect on the survival and well-being of these plants and larger ecosystems. Enchantment brings attention to the deep-seated settler biases against certain types of plants that are common or abundant or, more specifically, not of current commercial value.

**Keywords** enchantment, multispecies, kinship, boreal forest, Indigenous

### Enchantment in the Boreal

The Canadian boreal forest spans over 3 million square kilometers as the largest intact forest on earth. Perhaps overwhelmed by this vastness, Canadian settlers often describe the subarctic boreal forest and muskegs (peatland bogs) in what is now known as northern Alberta as nothing-places or wastelands comprised of mosquitos and loneliness that are best dewatered, mulched, and mined to gain access to the bituminous underground.<sup>1</sup> In “In Defense of the Wastelands: A Survival Guide,” *nehiyaw*<sup>2</sup> (Cree) writer

1. Baker and Westman, “Extracting Knowledge,” 151; Voyles, *Wastelanding*.

2. In *nehiyawewin* (Cree) orthography capitalization does not occur.

Erica Violet Lee describes her experience of the devastation of her boreal homelands in northern Saskatchewan: “To provide care in the wastelands is about gathering enough love to turn devastation into mourning and then, maybe, turn that mourning into hope.”<sup>3</sup> While participating in community-based environmental monitoring of forest foods for contaminants in the boreal forest, *sakâwiyiniwak* (Northern Bush Cree) research collaborators have taught me about an ethics of care for the landscape based on its sentience. Tending to protocols of respect and reciprocity illuminates the magic of woolly underleaves, insectivorous plants, and aspen bones. In an ethnoecological context checking on and caring for the boreal forest serves as a way of tending to relations, or a relational ethic that Indigenous peoples of the region have practiced for endless generations, ensuring their survival. Loving attentiveness to kin and forest kin alike prevents overharvesting.<sup>4</sup>

I grew up and live now in the southernmost tip of boreal forest in Alberta, Canada, as a fifth-generation settler on the border of Treaty Numbers 6 and 7. I have North Battleford maternal Métis ancestry, and, while influenced by my grandparents who are still alive, I do not self-identify as Indigenous. My work with *sakâwiyiniwak* (Fort McKay First Nation and Bigstone Cree Nation) is rooted in the intent of decolonization and reconciliation in Canada, while I grapple with my own familial history as ongoing settlers perpetuating a violent colonial structure, and as a descendant of a residential school survivor and the continuing dysfunction and trauma in my family.<sup>5</sup> It is when I am on the land with my grandparents or Elders and friends in the foothills of the Rockies or boreal forest that reconciliation begins to feel possible to me. Enacting kinship obligations of care through respect and reciprocity with people and sentient beings on the land is not always easy or magical (see Marianne E. Lien this issue), but it is a possible place to center decolonization, or at least living well with one another, human and more than human alike. A possible entry point to this sort of ecological care is from enchantment through noticing plants that we can consume and that can heal us.<sup>6</sup>

I cannot say that I have ever heard any of the *sakâwiyiniwak* who have shared their knowledge with me and collaborated with me on research describe their relationship with the land as a form of enchantment. Rather, I would describe their environmental ethic as more of an obligation to a demanding auntie who is difficult to satisfy. Aunties are relations, kin, and in this matriarchal society they are considered to be an extension of one’s mother, but with even more power to make your life pleasant, or rather unpleasant (see Piergiorgio Di Giminiani, this issue). This sense of kin-based obligation is based on keeping a balance of respect and reciprocity with the sentient world, one that generously provides food and medicine when a human follows proper ceremonial protocols

3. Lee, “In Defense of the Wastelands,” n.p.

4. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

5. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Honouring the Truth.”

6. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 4.

and is certain to never squander or hoard the beings that have offered themselves as gifts to humans.<sup>7</sup> I have written elsewhere about witnessing how berries, bears, and medicine observe and listen to human behavior and respond to it by acting with generosity, anger, or unavailability according to the quality of human behavior.<sup>8</sup> It has been during these multispecies ethnographic encounters that I have myself experienced moments of enchantment, or intense moments of noticing and “plant-thinking,” that have inspired me to appreciate in new ways the boreal forest and the many familiar plants that grow within it.<sup>9</sup> I hope that, by sharing a few of my experiences of trying to learn how to respect plants through sakâwiyiniwak relational ethics, I provide a possibility or an opening for those whose thinking is detached from mutual interspecies care.<sup>10</sup> I describe moments of enchantment as a visitor in Treaty No. 8 sakâwiyiniwak territories, and as an environmental anthropologist with mixed settler and Métis ancestry, with three different rooted beings, or culturally important plants, in the sakâwiyiniwak, and now my, world. This article is a written spell intended to seize the reader’s relational imagination through enchantment with lively boreal forest beings.<sup>11</sup>

In their article “Lively Ethnography: Storying Animist Worlds,” Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose introduce lively ethnography as “a mode of knowing, engaging, and storytelling that recognizes the meaningful lives of others and that, in so doing, enlivens our capacity to respond to them by singing up their character or ethos.”<sup>12</sup> I find this form of ethnographic thinking and writing particularly valuable for bridging the areas of study that consume most of my energy: ethnobotany and environmental anthropology. I swim in a world of interwoven enchanting stories and landscapes while contamination and destruction of boreal forest lifeways disenchant my watery thoughts. I need a tool for “allow[ing] multiple meanings to travel alongside one another” that “can hold open possibilities and interpretations and can refuse the kind of closure that prevents others from speaking or becoming.”<sup>13</sup> Lively ethnography offers a way of drawing the reader “into new connections and, with them, new accountabilities and obligation” to “cultivate the capacity for response.”<sup>14</sup> And so, “ethnographic storytelling is about responding to others as we encounter them in the richness of their own stories.”<sup>15</sup> How can one listen to a story without in some way incorporating that story into our being and consciousness? And once the story is a part of our being, it is our response-ability to uphold the ethics of care that we have been offered. Time in the boreal forest has taught me that when we speak of reconciliation it needs to be in relation with all life.

7. Scott, “Ontology and Ethics in Cree Hunting”; Westman, “The Wihkohtowin.”

8. Baker, “Do Berries Listen?”

9. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*; Marder, *Plant-Thinking*.

10. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*.

11. Van Dooren and Rose, “Lively Ethnography,” 91.

12. Van Dooren and Rose, “Lively Ethnography,” abstract.

13. Van Dooren and Rose, “Lively Ethnography,” 84–85.

14. Van Dooren and Rose, “Lively Ethnography,” 89.

15. Van Dooren and Rose, “Lively Ethnography,” 89.

With reconciliation in mind I sing up the character of boreal forest plants, written in the style of “lively ethnography” here for two reasons.<sup>16</sup> First of all, I write about plants that are of ceremonial, nutritional, and medicinal use for sakâwiyiniwak who care for the plants with strict ethical protocols of gratitude, harvesting without harming the plant, and reciprocal sharing. Second, I describe plants that are, despite being indigenous, often overlooked or that are described as nuisance weeds by settlers whose decisions about natural-resource extraction activities have a direct effect on the survival and well-being of these plants and the larger ecosystems. I bring attention to the deep-seated settler biases against certain types of plants that are common or abundant or, more specifically, not of current commercial value. These plants grow on a low rung of the ladder of hierarchies of worth, with their first “fault” being noncommercial plants,<sup>17</sup> and their second “fault” being plants that grow in the muskeg.<sup>18</sup>

The two neighboring and interrelated First Nations communities I engage with here, Fort McKay First Nation and Bigstone Cree Nation, have large traditional territories that are being disrupted by bitumen (oil sands) extraction, related oil and gas activities, and logging. The regulators, environmental impact assessors, ecological modelers, and construction crews do not consider the death of individual plants or the lack of enactment of protocols of respect and reciprocity in part because to the settler gaze plants are not sentient.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, by attuning our senses and emotions with plant kin we can experience glimpses of an intense and radical way of existing in the world.<sup>20</sup> Plants, as teachers, are pure observers of the world as a whole, intricately functioning system.<sup>21</sup>

In *Lost Spells*, a book of “spoken charms” and bewitching depictions that breathe life into forgotten and disappearing species through naming them, Robert MacFarlane and Jackie Morris remind us that “wonder is needed now more than ever. ‘To enchant’ means both to make magic and to sing out.”<sup>22</sup> In this article I hope to enchant the reader when I describe my own surprise encounters. I take up Jane Bennett’s call to “notice new colors, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify.”<sup>23</sup> In her book *Enchantment of Modern Life* Bennett explains that when one is enchanted “the world comes alive as a collection of singularities. Enchantment includes . . . a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity. To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense, to be both caught up and carried away—enchantment is marked by this odd combination of somatic

16. Van Dooren and Rose, “Lively Ethnography,” 77.

17. “Antispecies animalism is just another form of anthropocentrism and a kind of internalized Darwinism: it extends human narcissism to the animal realm.” Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 2–3.

18. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 3.

19. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 2–3.

20. Baker, “Do Berries Listen?”

21. Coccia, *Life of Plants*, 5.

22. MacFarlane and Morris, *Lost Spells*, 2.

23. Bennett, *Enchantment*, 14.

effects.”<sup>24</sup> *Somatic effects* is the perfect term to describe the physical sensation of plant enchantment as an outsider witnessing sakâwiyiniwak ways of caring for plant kin, whom I call “plaunties,” meaning “plant aunties,” a term I learned in conversation with Métis fish philosopher Zoe Todd.

Before sharing my plant stories, or “conversations with plaunties,” I need to make a distinction between forms of charms and enchantment. Here I am writing about experiences in which I, with the aid of sakâwiyiniwak research collaborators, have experienced moments of enchantment with boreal forest plants. There is another type of magic, or “medicine” that sakâwiyiniwak identify, that is known as doing or making good or bad medicine, or can be understood as cursing.<sup>25</sup> To other First Nations in western Canada, some of the communities I work with are infamous for their power in cursing and healing people, and indeed most people I know in these communities talk about different ways they have observed these powers in action. It is for this reason, for example, that I and my research collaborators did not want to sample people’s hair for contaminants testing during our community-based food studies, as a person’s hair can be used in cursing. Another way that people are accused of cursing is through love medicine, which can include the use of certain plants. I have been warned of the signs or symptoms of this “magic,” often used by an older man to trap a younger woman. My increasing age is likely protecting me from this sort of medicine, but some people have hinted about certain, often purple-flowered plants that are used in love medicine, and there is an aster referred to as “big love” in English, but I cannot profess to have the recipe to share here.<sup>26</sup>

### **Muskeg Tea (*Rhododendron groenlandicum* and *Rhododendron tomentosum*)**

Muskeg is a term widely used in Canada and is an anglicized spelling of the *nehiwewin* (Cree) word *maskek* that describes the peat bogs of the subarctic boreal forest.<sup>27</sup> Muskeg smells like earthy tea and is mossy, deep, and spongy with yellow, dark-green colors topped with oranges and crunchy white caribou lichen and muskeg tea. The name *muskeg tea* is a translation of *maskêkopak*, the *sakaw nehiyawewin* (literally “the Bush Cree language”) name for the plant, which means a white muskeg flower or a leaf that grows in the muskeg.<sup>28</sup> The term *maskêkopak* can also refer to herbal or medicinal tea, implying the central use and value of muskeg tea. I have certainly had circular conversations with sakâwiyiniwak friends and collaborators when I have asked the name for muskeg tea in their language, and then asked the name for bush tea and received the

24. Bennett, *Enchantment*, 14.

25. Siegfried, “Ethnobotany of the Northern Cree of Wabasca/Desmarais,” 124–26; Westman, *Cree and Christian*.

26. Sorry.

27. For a description of the use of the term in Canada see Joly, “Growing (with) Muskeg.”

28. Waugh, *Alberta Elders’ Cree Dictionary*, 367, 74; Siegfried, “Ethnobotany of the Northern Cree of Wabasca/Desmarais,” 264, 367.

same answer. Muskeg tea is one of many members of the heath or heather family (*Ericaceae*) that grows throughout the Canadian boreal forest in the muskeg. It has woody stems and alternating evergreen, leathery leaves that curl under on the edges and point out and down at the moss with sharp angles. Its remarkable feature is what is underneath: the undersides of the leaves are covered in a fuzzy wool that is a pale greenish-white in the spring and turns into a rusty-golden color in the late summer and early fall. Most of the leaves cling to the woody stems throughout the winter, under the snow, and in the spring new leaves push upward from under a scaly, cone-like growth, followed by white fragrant umbels that reach upward and paint the muskeg with a temporary splash of white. Middle-aged friends from Bigstone Cree Nation have told me with a chuckle that they would collect these leaves when they were children and sell little baggies of them door-to-door. People still often drink tea made from muskeg leaves with bags of black tea and sugar for flavor and as a preventative medicine. It is good for the heart and for energy or relaxation, and the tea can be concentrated and used as a strong medicine, ointment (for ailments like arthritis), or salve (for skin infections), when mixed with other medicinal plants.<sup>29</sup> A lovely use of the leaf is to put fish oil on the woolly side of a large leaf and apply it to the belly button of a newborn to speed healing.<sup>30</sup> People pick the leaves in the summer and dry them to use throughout the winter, but in a pinch the evergreen leaves can also be picked from underneath the snow.<sup>31</sup>

Canadians are taught in grade school that when the settlers arrived in what would become Canada they were often sick with scurvy from their time on ships. This is one of the many ways that Indigenous people helped the settlers to survive: they shared a drink made from the leaves of muskeg tea, which is often called “Labrador tea” in Canada and is rich in vitamin C.<sup>32</sup> Some people know the plant as “Hudson’s Bay tea” because of this connection with early colonizers, and ethnobotanists Harriet V. Kuhnlein and Nancy J. Turner note that Samuel Hearne wrote about Hudson’s Company servants drinking tea made from muskeg leaves.<sup>33</sup> Apparently muskeg tea was the beverage of choice for American colonists also, and during the seventeenth-century Boston Tea Party rebellion, they dumped imported black tea into Griffin’s Wharf as a rejection of British imperialism and drank muskeg tea with pride.<sup>34</sup>

Muskeg tea is recognizable and abundant, and it has a settler folk history telling of First Nations generosity, identity, and survival. For me, enchantment with muskeg tea occurred when trying to correlate the English names with the *sakaw nehiyawewin* and

29. Siegfried, “Ethnobotany of the Northern Cree of Wabasca/Desmarais,” 265.

30. Johnson et al., *Plants of the Western Boreal Forest*, 70.

31. See a similar story told to the author by Fort McKay Elder Celina Harpe about cranberries in Baker, “Cranberries Are Medicine,” 117.

32. Kuhnlein and Turner, *Traditional Plant Foods*, 297.

33. Kuhnlein and Turner, *Traditional Plant Foods*, 112.

34. Dana, “Commercial Cities and Towns,” 28.

Latin names, and the actual plants. I am not a botanist, but I have taken some botany and plant taxonomy courses and have been a fortunate student of sakâwiyiniwak Elders and plant specialists since about 2006. I often spend time checking *sakaw nehiyawewin* names against English common names and then Latin names, or even identifying or “keying out” plants. Because it is such a familiar plant, I do not remember the first time I learned to recognize muskeg tea in the bush, but it was likely when I was a small child learning from my mom or her parents. So when people have instructed me to pick some muskeg tea or asked me if I would like to drink some, I have done so with delight, but admittedly not in a state of heightened wonder. That is, until an Elder told me that what I thought was muskeg tea was not the correct plant.

In spring 2015 I was out checking berry plant flowers with members from Fort McKay First Nation, and at the same time I was collecting plants in bloom for herbarium specimens to be stored in the community and at the Athabasca University T. S. Bakshi Herbarium.<sup>35</sup> The plant that I think of as muskeg tea was in bloom. It has bright white clusters (terminal umbels) that burst above the plants, like fireworks. Elders Clara and Andrew Bouchier, however, insisted that that plant was not muskeg tea. This was not the plant that was “good for drinking.” I have seen people in other First Nation communities use it as tea, so now I was now really confused. I made a note to myself to figure out which plant was in fact the muskeg tea that people like to drink.

Later that summer when working on a project with Bigstone Cree Nation on bush food contamination, I was out with a group of Bigstone environmental monitors, guided by Elder Albert Yellowknee, sampling plants and animals to send to the laboratory for testing.<sup>36</sup> Albert took us to an area not far from where I lived at the time on the North Wabasca Lake, and very near the water treatment lagoon, to find what he described as the strong, medicinal type of muskeg tea. There it was, much smaller than the muskeg tea I have described above, tiny in comparison, with each stem singular like a little scraggly pine tree. It reminded me of lavender in that, when you rub its small almost needle-like, leathery leaves, a fragrant oil is left on your fingers. We sampled some of this plant to send for contaminants testing, and Albert told us a story about “bear holes” in the muskeg that animals go into when they need to be cleansed and healed.<sup>37</sup> This smaller version of muskeg tea is stronger and more medicinal, and it is used to cleanse and heal.

A week later I found myself back in the berry patch northwest of Fort McMurray in Fort McKay’s ancestral area, Moose Lake, chatting about muskeg tea.<sup>38</sup> The conversation began when Elders Andrew Bouchier and Walter Orr told me that the green tea I was

35. The collection, mostly of plants from the Athabasca region, is available online at <https://digicon.athabascau.ca/cdm/search/collection/Herbarium> (accessed March 9, 2022).

36. Baker, “Research as Reciprocity.”

37. Baker, “Bear Stories in the Berry Patch,” 130.

38. Cuerrier et al., “Cultural Keystone Places,” 437–38, 440–41.

drinking smelled like muskeg tea. The larger version of muskeg tea grows everywhere around Moose Lake and Fort McKay, and by this time of year the leaves were starting to turn a golden rust color, especially the velvety undersides. I took several close-up photos of the rust-colored wool and became fascinated that this color and texture, reminiscent of embroidery or woven tapestries, can occur on the bottom side of a leaf. Andrew and Walter again told me this is not the kind of muskeg tea that you actually drink, but another Elder, Wilfred Grandjambe, told me that, while it is not the best kind, many people drink it. This reflected my experience with Bigstone Cree Nation members who regularly drink the large variety as a beverage. Walter and Andrew told me that the “good” kind grows across the river and that it has smaller leaves. Andrew’s wife, Clara, added that the tea cleans out your system. So that evening we headed to see a family graveyard that is abundant with lingonberries (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) and stopped by the muskeg tea patch across the river. The sun was setting slowly, scattering purple in the southwestern sky as Andrew offered tobacco to the plant to ask the plant permission and express our gratitude to be able to collect some of the tiny delicate leaves and stems. The aromatic almost lemony scent of the needles filled the moist and mossy air as we collected stems in silence while the thick moss of the muskeg dampened the sounds of the boreal.

I was now more certain and able to identify the smaller and stronger muskeg tea as *Rhododendron tomentosum*.<sup>39</sup> English common names are “northern Labrador tea” and “marsh Labrador tea,” and it is often described as the dwarfed variety.<sup>40</sup> It has similar features and size as the poisonous bog laurel (*Kalmia* spp.), and so one must be certain to identify the correct plant, which is much easier to accomplish when the plants are in bloom. Knowing what the mystery variety was confirmed to me that the larger, more abundant plant is *Rhododendron groenlandicum*, the plant widely known as Labrador tea in Canada. It turns out that the two species have different prominent volatile oils, contributing to their different flavors, scents, and medicinal properties.<sup>41</sup> It was in trying to correct my mistake and identify the two species of muskeg tea that I spent time with the plant, that I finally noticed and examined it closely, and became enchanted by its colors, textures, and scents.<sup>42</sup> Before the Elders corrected my thinking, I too, took the plant for granted in its familiarity and abundance.

Bigstone Cree Nation members are anxiously concerned as logging companies use glyphosate to target plants in the reforestation process, including muskeg tea, which foresters label a weed.<sup>43</sup> Community members are not certain which plants or animals

39. Kershaw and Allen, *Vascular Flora of Alberta*, 164.

40. Marles et al., *Aboriginal Plant Use*, 179.

41. Jesionek et al., “Chemical Variability of *Rhododendron tomentosum*”; Judzentiene et al., “Toxic, Radical Scavenging”; Rapinski et al., “Adipogenic Activity of Wild Populations”; Rapinski et al., “Environmental Trends”; Dufour et al., “Antioxidant, Anti-inflammatory, and Anticancer Activities.”

42. Kirksey, “Species.”

43. Hebert, “Biology of Canadian Weeds.”



or soils are pollutant free and safe for consumption. I have noticed that Elders, friends, and their children and grandchildren do not make the error of connecting muskeg tea's abundance with disposability. This plant is revered and enjoyed as a plauntie who shakes when she laughs and has plenty of treats and tissues hiding in her various pockets. As the muskeg is deforested and sprayed with chemicals, it is drying up. People are genuinely worried about having access to a healthy, safe, and abundant muskeg tea supply and being able to care for and protect the medicine that has been keeping people healthy for many generations. The irony is that the plant that helped settlers survive is now threatened by their descendants. An obvious act of reconciliation is to consider how muskeg tea is affected by our actions, and to attend to this plant's needs with care.

### **Frog's Pants (*Sarracenia purpurea*)**

Unlike muskeg tea, *ayikitâ*, which sakâwiyiniwak call “frog's pants” or “frog's legs” in Cree-English and is more broadly known as northern pitcher plant in English, is not a plant that you can find just anywhere. I can distinctly remember every time I have encountered this plant in the muskeg in northern Alberta, and every time it has been in bloom, as the extra-terrestrial-like blossoms dangle from the end of a hollow stem-hook above its purple-veined leaves, flagging its presence. Only one species (*Sarracenia purpurea*) of this carnivorous genus lives in Alberta, so there is no question of what it is when you see it. Almost every time I have met the plant it has been because an Elder knew exactly where to find it, as the leaves and enzymatic fluid that sits inside the pitcher or cup-like formation that the leaves grow together to form are both important medicinal ingredients. I have seen Elders use the leaves, neatly rolled up and dried or ground into powder, with other plants as medicine for fever, urinary tract issues, and headaches. Several Elders have told me that the fluid inside the plant (the digestive enzymes mixed with dew and rainwater) can be poured into a person's ear to cure earaches. Evelyn Vicky Siegfried, a Bigstone Cree Nation member who wrote her master of arts thesis on Bigstone Cree Nation ethnobotany, notes that frog's pants can be used as “herbal water, [and] crushed and sniffed.”<sup>44</sup> Elders know the stories well that frog's pants was used effectively to treat people during the deadly small pox pandemic, and the plant has recently been analyzed and verified to have antiviral activity against both pox and herpes viruses.<sup>45</sup>

Seeing this plant in the wild enchants me. I always gasp upon the first sight—the plant has leaves that literally look like flesh with purple veins and bristly hairs. The light shines through them. I would be inclined to call them “pig's ears” rather than “frog's pants.” The blossoms look leathery and green and purple and not like flowers at all. The inside of the leaves that form the pitcher, or container, are lined with downward pointed bristles that force insects inside and stop them from being able to escape

44. Siegfried, “Ethnobotany of the Northern Cree of Wabasca/Desmarais,” 122.

45. Kannan et al., “Anti-herpes Virus Activity.”

out of the opening.<sup>46</sup> The pitcher holds rainwater, dew, and enzymes, so once insects (and sometimes amphibians) are trapped, they drown and are digested and absorbed by the plant.

I have visited the same patch twice with late Bigstone Cree Nation Elder Cibomb (Clement Auger).<sup>47</sup> The first time I was amazed to see such a large population of frog's pants in one place. It was a hidden location that Cibomb visited and cared for often, and then he cared for Elders in the community by returning with frog's pants leaves for them. It could be argued that this care and reciprocity that Cibomb showed for his plaunties is what ensured such a large community of them, as they liked to visit, and Cibomb distributed the leaves to people who were in need. There is sakâwiyiniwak wisdom that food and medicinal plants only appear to people when they choose to, not unlike animals who choose to present themselves to a hunter.<sup>48</sup> This happened to Cibomb and me the second year that we visited the frog's pants on his trap line. It was a hot and dry summer, the same one in which massive fires burned through Fort McMurray to the east of us, and we were on our way to find a lost berry patch when Cibomb stopped to visit the frog's pants.<sup>49</sup> I was almost eight months pregnant at the time, and I lumbered my way through the deep muskeg to get to the fringe of black spruce trees that protect the frog's pants from direct sunlight and wind introduced by the construction of a pipeline. When we got there, we could not see the plants—they were hiding. Cibomb trudged ahead and I leaned against a black spruce for shade and lazily swatted the air at mosquitos and flies with a switch from a nearby leafy shrub. Suddenly, like magic, out of the moss the frog's pants appeared, all around my feet, in bloom. Cibomb eventually came back, and he was surprised to have walked right past them. Everything about frog's pants is enchanting, as these fleshy-looking plants shock and delight the human senses, evoking admiration and awe.

How is it that pipelines and logging companies can clear areas where this wondrous plant lives? The Alberta Conservation Management System classifies frog's pants provincially as vulnerable, meaning it is rare or uncommon, with between twenty and one hundred occurrences in the province.<sup>50</sup> I swear I have seen at least half that number in various First Nations territories in northern Alberta, with many of the plants being on Cibomb's trap line and several of them likely killed when the pipeline was constructed. This ranking in the conservation system (S3) notes that the species is likely susceptible to large-scale disturbances and may be assigned to a watch list, if there are no high populations in other places in the world. Frog's pants in Alberta is not tracked

46. Johnson et al., *Plants of the Western Boreal Forest*, 210.

47. "Cibomb" is a shortened version of the sakaw nehiyawewin word *cibombosis* that refers to a little owl, most likely the boreal owl (*Aegolius funereus*).

48. Baker, "Do Berries Listen?"; Westman et al., "Encountering Moose in a Changing Landscape."

49. Baker, "Bear Stories in the Berry Patch"; Baker, "In Search of the Toxic Berry Patch."

50. Alberta Parks, <https://www.albertaparks.ca/albertaparksca/management-land-use/alberta-conservation-information-management-system-acims/> (accessed March 9, 2022).

or watched because nationally and globally the plant is considered safe from current threat. The argument that this important medicinal plant does not need to be protected because it is abundant in other parts of a large country like Canada is flawed. If the plant is no longer available in Bigstone Cree Nation territory, then how will people access its medicine? First Nations Elders already have a difficult time finding or getting to places where the medicine grows, and they rely on people like Cibomb to tend to and care for the plants, making offerings, showing it respect, and sharing it with people who need its medicine. Will those plants be able to weather the changes in the environment and drying of the muskeg? It seems outrageous to me that an extractive company is not required to identify and avoid this plant during environmental impact assessments, especially considering this plant is a known antiviral in a time of a pandemic. How could that quality alone not enchant someone enough to protect and care for it? This plant is a good example of perceived abundance of a plant, spread across a large land mass, justifying its individual and localized abuse. It is also an example of where enchantment might not be enough on its own to inspire a relational ethic. As awe-inspiring as the plant is, a relational ethic is needed to ensure its proper care so that it may care for us.

#### **The Boss Tree (*Populus tremuloides*)**

*Wâpimitos* (literally, white poplar tree), or trembling aspen, grows in almost everyone's backyard, as it is the most populous tree in Alberta. While its value is often overlooked by settlers, it is the beaver's preferred food source. Protecting the deciduous tree from overharvesting, industrial clearing, and pollution is particularly difficult, as protection of a species is often based on its rare or endangered status, rather than Indigenous cultural value. I have heard many people who work in forestry and its related fields call aspen and other types of poplar "weeds" and say that they "grow like weeds," referring to the fact that, while they can propagate through seeds, they more often grow suckers, or clones, that shoot up and create a colony of one tree genetically.<sup>51</sup> Despite being aware of some of their medicinal properties, I have only recently learned that, just because aspen are abundant or commonly found, it does not mean that their value is lessened. Aspen, as a member of the culturally important willow family *Salicaceae*, has outer bark that contains salicylic acid, which is the original source of aspirin.<sup>52</sup> Siegfried wrote that Bigstone Cree members both eat the cambium and use it as an anticoagulant.<sup>53</sup> Many people use aspen as a preferred wood for smoking moose meat and fish, and the punkier the better. I am guilty of the error of overlooking aspen in my life in general and while in the bush with Elders, as demonstrated by having fewer photos of aspen than almost any other plant. Yet Bigstone Cree Nation Elder Albert Yellowknee has expressed his grave

51. Johnson et al., *Plants of the Western Boreal Forest*, 35.

52. Balick and Cox, *Plants, People, and Culture*, 21.

53. Siegfried, "Ethnobotany of the Northern Cree of Wabasca/Desmarais," 121.

concern to me about a local pulp mill and several companies logging aspen trees and applying glyphosate to discourage future aspen growth and promote monocrops of merchantable softwood timber.

The first time that I realized there is something especially important or powerful about aspen trees is when I was asking my friend Helen Noskiye's partner, Robert (Bob) Gladue, about eating poplar cambium. It was spring, and many sakâwiyiniwak have told me that they eat the sticky green layer under the bark in the spring when the sap starts running, and that it is like candy for children.<sup>54</sup> I was nudging Bob to take me out to have a little snack, but it was a few weeks too early, or Bob just did not want to deal with me and my childish requests. Nonetheless, Bob did tell me that when he has been out hunting he has seen moose (*Alces alces*), the preferred meat source in the region, scraping off the bark with their teeth and eating the aspen cambium too.<sup>55</sup> Helen interjected, saying that the trees that have been scraped by animals, and are smooth and white owing to lack of bark, are the ones that lightning will strike. Trees that have been struck by lightning can have special properties for medicine people. Helen and her brothers, Dennis and Joe, also told me a story to explain that medicine used to be so powerful before colonization, that they had an older sister and someone put medicine on a tree so that it would fall on her. Their sister was out walking between their parents and the tree fell and only landed on her, killing her, and it did not touch their parents.

Earlier that year Elder Albert Yellowknee had told me of the great importance of aspen in sakâwiyiniwak culture, but it had not yet sunk in for me. He told me: "Poplar is the true king tree *okimowatik* [boss poplar]. You put it in the center with buffalo heart at sundance. When you cut it down, you don't let it touch the ground. You take the buffalo heart out and you eat it at ceremony. Pipe stem<sup>56</sup> is made from *okimowatik*." How was I not seeing the aspen all around me? It was during summer 2020 when Albert, and many other Bigstone Cree Nation members, were expressing their dismay about the increase in logging in their traditional territories that Albert told me more about aspen:

So the poplar tree in many First Nations is the key tree. Like the sundance for instance, as an example, it's the poplar tree. The one that's cut down and they put a nest on top and that's where the eagles come from. With all the prints and whatnot. But besides that, what I was going to say was that our medicines—when you speak your language and you talk to your medicines, you're spiritually connected. So I want to talk a little about these two guys [who] were after the same woman. So they fought physically, then mentally. This one that really wanted the lady, he then arranged something with this

54. For description of Indigenous peoples eating other tree cambiums like candy, see Turner, "That Was Our Candy!"; Marles et al., *Aboriginal Plant Use*, 250–52; Siegfried, "Ethnobotany of the Northern Cree of Wabasca/Desmarais," 106, 110.

55. Johnson et al., *Plants of the Western Boreal Forest*, 35. Describes ungulates eating aspen bark/cambium during starvation times.

56. Pipes are one of the most important and revered ceremonial items.

Elder, the one that had all the traditional knowledge about our medicines. So what happened next was that—this guy over here, the one that was with the lady—so this guy got angry and that’s what that Elder is going to make—make the medicines with. The ones that are powerful and strong and can hurt or take away the life of people. So that’s what he did for his son because he couldn’t get the woman that he wanted. So when he was ready, he gave the medicine to this first one. To this man with the woman. So one day when he had the chance, they seen them together, to make it simpler, so he went back home and he got his rifle, and what he did was he shot, he shot the tree. The aspen. He shot it. Within hours that man died. So, he got his woman.

In the creation story we are told that that’s how we came to be. The bones are of the poplar tree that made the man. And then the creator put lightning strike, [and] that’s how we came to be. Humans. That’s what I’m trying to say; this is why these connections, this is why we are connected with our medicines. This is why we do things the way we do, traditionally, we keep them right. Medicines. We can share them, providing they can share back with something.

As the tree that made the bones of humans, the tree that can have such a strong interspecies connection with a human that if someone shoots the tree, it kills the human, the aspen really is the “boss” tree. Now when I see the powdery white bark of the aspen, I see origins. Imagine witnessing the large-scale logging of the most sacred tree that gave humans their bones. Helen had told me that the tree that the moose scraped off the bark from, the one that was shiny and smooth like a bone, is the one lightning strikes. At the time I did not realize that she was referring to the human origin story, or that the creation of humans from aspen trees is a renewal that continues to this day, aided by the moose and by ceremony.

### **Boreal Enchantment**

As enchanting as multispecies ethnographic encounters in the boreal forest are, the loss of land and life in parts of the boreal forest is out of balance with kinship-based reciprocity. The ecological grief that sakâwiyiniwak living in the oil sands region of the northern Alberta boreal forests experience is undeniable. I witness and experience it and see that the grief people feel is from the loss of kin. Many people have gone from living in the bush with their families, to residential schools, to reconnecting with the land to only experience large-scale deforestation and industrial development in the same bush they lived in as children. Clearly people make the best of the opportunities that come to them, but the unethical and greedy destruction of plaunties who enable humans to survive is nonsensical and disgraceful to many sakâwiyiniwak Elders. For these Elders, boreal forest destruction disrupts the cycles of reciprocity that humans are meant to uphold with the natural world. By “singing up” the plants that Elders have deep relations with, I am attempting to enchant the reader with lively ethnography. We all need enchantment in this time of global existential crisis and a “counterstory [that] seeks to induce an experience of the contemporary world—a world of inequity, racism,

pollution, poverty, violence of all kinds—as also enchanted—not a tale of re-enchantment but one that calls attention to magical sites already here.”<sup>57</sup> Magical sites can be small and abundant, fuzzy, carnivorous, or ubiquitous even, as the ones I have called attention to here, thanks to sakâwiyiniwak collaborators who have had the patience to share the magic of plants in the boreal forest with me. Van Dooren and Bird Rose write, “It is the aim of lively ethnographies to seize our relational imagination. It is an engagement with the joys, passions, desires, and commitments of Earth others, celebrating . . . in all their extravagant diversity.”<sup>58</sup> While enchantment might not be a clear path to ecological care, and it certainly is not always easy or readily available, I share these ethnographic moments of plant-thinking here as a spell for reconciliation, to suggest that we need to answer to the plaunties for our bad behavior.

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#### Acknowledgments

The Elders discussed in this article direct my research, and I endeavor to respond to their instruction and concerns in my writing. The editors of this special issue have been attentive and supportive, and I am grateful for their invitation and for bringing all of us together in conversation. *Merci* to the other authors in this special issue for their humbling contributions, and finally, thank you to the reviewers for their labor and valuable comments and advice.

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57. Bennett, *Enchantment*, 14.

58. Van Dooren and Rose, “Lively Ethnography,” 91.

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