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Smudging as a Metaphor for Critical Relational Reflexivity in Indigenist Research

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Abstract: Calls for more relationally grounded approaches to qualitative inquiry have highlighted limitations in conventional reflexivity frameworks that emphasize individual positionality and self-examination while giving less attention to the ethical, cultural, and relational responsibilities within Indigenist research. This manuscript presents a critical relational reflexivity framework that emerged through collaborative autoethnographic inquiry between a non-Indigenous scholar and a Niitsítapi scholar. Drawing on critical Indigenous research methodologies, relational accountability, and Indigenous understandings of interconnectedness, the authors explore smudging as both a metaphor and a teaching for preparing scholars to engage in Indigenist research. Building on relational accountability, the framework describes how scholars continually examine whether their positionality, interpretations, and actions uphold their responsibilities across human and other-than-human relationships. The framework includes three interconnected dimensions: self-relational reflexivity, interpersonal relational reflexivity, and metaphysical relational reflexivity. Grounded in the six beliefs of smudging and illustrated through lived-experience vignettes, the framework repositions reflexivity as a relational responsibility. By centering Indigenous worldviews, it offers practical and philosophical guidance for conducting research with humility and accountability to Indigenous communities and knowledge systems.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Critical Relational Reflexivity, Indigenous methodologies, Indigenist research, Niitsítapi, Smudge

Māori scholar Whitinui reminds us that meaning emerges through the relationships, stories, and realities that connect people to one another (personal communication, April 10, 2026). This perspective offers an important starting point for understanding the collaborative journey traced throughout this manuscript. Framed as a collaborative autoethnographic methodological essay, this article aligns with the work of Nisa-Waller and Piercy (2024), who emphasize the importance of centering Indigenous beliefs and values, and with Maher and Loncopán (2024), who argue that "co-authoring with Indigenous authors entails the

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redistribution of power" (p. 915). Guided by this understanding, we adhere to the principles of Indigenous autoethnography, which distinguishes itself from traditional autoethnography by centering Indigenous values, ways of being, and ways of knowing as foundational to the research process (Bishop, 2021; Woodhouse & Te Maihāroa, 2024).

Emerging from this relational grounding, the study draws on scholars who caution that Indigenous ways of knowing may not transfer easily into university-based knowledge production (Coburn et al., 2013; Chakma, 2026) without careful attention to how scholars are trained within academic institutions (Macdonald et al., 2023). Engaging with this challenge reshaped how we understood our relationships to research. It also highlighted a gap in the literature on how non-Indigenous scholars develop a decolonizing approach to reflexivity within Indigenist scholarship (Chawla & Atay, 2018; Hughes et al., 2023), particularly in partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars working across distinct epistemological traditions. While relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) is widely recognized as foundational to Indigenist inquiry, less attention has been given to how reflexivity develops within collaborative autoethnographic partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars.

Grounded in this understanding of relationality, this manuscript demonstrates a critical qualitative approach (Clark, 2026; Denzin, 2017; Shaw et al., 2022) to collaborative research between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. Guided by Two-Eyed Seeing (Bartlett et al., 2012), which encourages learning from the strengths of both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems (viedo-Berrocal et al., 2026; Rathwell et al., 2025; Reid et al., 2021), the authors present smudging as a powerful metaphor and teaching for engaging critical relational reflexivity in Indigenist research. Drawing on critical Indigenous research methodologies (CIRM) (Brayboy & Lucero, 2023; Tsosie et al., 2022), this work illustrates how elements of smudging can guide scholars toward more relationally centered research practices.

Our methodological choices reflect a commitment to honoring relationships in both practice and process. Relational accountability led us to adopt Wilson and Hughes' (2019) framing of Indigenist research as a philosophical approach rooted in Indigenous values, ways of being, and ways of knowing. Their approach develops from relationships shaped by place and culture rather than from isolated or surface-level interactions. We were drawn to this perspective because it supports the idea that Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers can participate meaningfully in Indigenist research when they prioritize the lived experiences, histories, traditions, dreams, aspirations, and struggles of Indigenous peoples, recognizing that knowledge emerges through these interconnected relationships and responsibilities (Rigney, 1999; Niko et al., 2024).

This orientation reflects Kovach's (2021) argument that meaningful engagement with Indigenous methodologies requires non-Indigenous scholars to approach Indigenous Knowledge on its own epistemological and cultural terms rather than interpreting it through Eurocentric assumptions. Kovach further emphasizes that while Indigenous scholars often share their ways of knowing through relational teaching, non-Indigenous allies also bear responsibility to learn with humility and challenge the dominance of Western paradigms. This manuscript documents one example of that continuing learning journey. Through sustained relationship and collaborative inquiry, Lona shared Niitsítapi teachings that challenged and expanded Shawn's understanding of relational accountability. The resulting framework should therefore be understood not as a universal model derived from detached observation but as a relationally situated account of learning that emerged through dialogue, Indigenous teaching, and shared meaning-making.

This manuscript develops and illustrates a critical relational reflexivity framework that uses smudging as a metaphorical and methodological guide for scholars engaging in Indigenist research. This framework responds to Atwood et al. (2024), who suggest that while

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decolonization has created space for Indigenous Knowledges within Western science, few efforts have recognized Indigenous "ontologies, epistemologies, pedagogies, and methodologies" (p. 773) as axiomatic. Wilson (2007) similarly argues, "It is the use of an Indigenist paradigm that creates [new] Indigenous Knowledge" (p. 194).

This manuscript responds to critiques that conventional qualitative inquiry has privileged cognitive reflection and narrowly defined forms of legitimate knowledge while marginalizing relational, spiritual, and other ways of knowing (Kovach, 2021). Rather than positioning Indigenous Knowledge as supplementary to existing methodologies, it demonstrates how Indigenous teachings fundamentally reshape reflexivity. The manuscript aligns with the broader movement of Indigenous self-determination, in which Indigenous peoples are no longer positioned as objects of research but as knowledge holders, methodological authorities, and partners in knowledge creation (Coburn et al., 2013). By centering Indigenous ways of knowing as foundational to qualitative inquiry, the framework expands methodological understandings of how researchers prepare themselves to engage ethically with knowledge through complex accountability (Clark, 2026; Starblanket, 2018; Wildcat & Voth, 2023), while contributing to the ongoing work of decolonizing research.

Within this orientation, critical relational reflexivity challenges researchers to move toward genuine relational engagement, in which Indigenous worldviews meaningfully inform the structure and intent of research processes (Atwood et al., 2024; Kwame, 2017). Because ethical responsibility is realized through relationships, those relationships become the spaces in which researchers continually examine how their decisions, interpretations, and actions uphold their responsibilities to Indigenous peoples, communities, and knowledge systems (Hoskins et al., 2011). Beyond its contribution to Indigenist research, this manuscript contributes to critical methodology by demonstrating how Indigenous teachings can reshape reflexivity through relational accountability and ethical responsibility.

In what follows, we use Absolon's (W)holistic flower framework to organize the article's methodological movement, drawing upon lived experiences, relational dialogue, and autoethnographic vignettes (Huber, 2024) to develop and illustrate a critical relational reflexivity framework for Indigenist research. The roots locate our worldviews and relational commitments; the flower center positions us as co-authors; the stem develops critical consciousness and critical relational reflexivity; the leaves describe our use of metaphor and vignette-based story sharing; and the petals present smudging as a threshold for self-relational, interpersonal relational, and metaphysical relational reflexivity.

Our Flower Seed

Absolon (2022) uses the metaphor of a petal flower as a (W)holistic representation of an Indigenous research framework. Research rooted in Indigenous worldviews supports ethics and principles based on Indigenous ways of knowing throughout the research process. The framework embodies an Indigenous understanding of (W)holistic theory as "whole, ecological, cyclical, and relational" (Absolon, 2019, p. 25). Following Pidgeon and Riley (2021), we intentionally spell "holistic" with a "W" to highlight an Indigenous perspective on being whole and the interconnectedness of all things, animate and inanimate.

The flower framework consists of six interconnected parts: roots, flower center, leaves, stem, petals, and research environment (Absolon, 2022). Although we do not treat the research environment as a separate section, Wilson's (2008) Research Ceremony provides the relational environment that surrounds and sustains the entire inquiry. Within this environment, knowledge emerges through relationships, and the research process carries responsibilities to the people, teachings, stories, other-than-human beings, and knowledge systems encountered through those

relationships. These responsibilities reach beyond the human because of kincentricity, a worldview in which humans and the natural world belong to one extended ecological family bound by common ancestry and origins, and in which agency is not reserved for humans but is distributed across the many parts of a socioecological system (Martinez et al., 2023). In our inquiry, this means other-than-human beings take part as relatives rather than as objects of study. The framework's (W)holistic nature matters because it centers relationships as the focus of academic inquiry and creates space for bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews into relationship while respecting their distinct epistemological foundations. We draw on Absolon's metaphorical flower to guide our Indigenist research journey, embedding it with inquiry strategies (Wilson, 2008). Like planting a seed in fertile soil, this journey begins with intention, grows through relationships, and blossoms into meaning-making.

Our Roots

The roots metaphorically position our worldviews. Worldview situates one's place, fosters connections to land, people, and cultural traditions, and shapes methodology by framing the purpose, process, and responsibilities of research (Absolon, 2022). Although roots are often unseen, they become visible in how we live and act. In this sense, our inner foundations, including values and beliefs, show up in the choices we make and the relationships we nurture.

Just as roots anchor a flower, our intersecting worldviews provide the hidden foundation from which our dual perspectives emerge. Kimmerer (2013) uses the metaphor of a braid to symbolize weaving different knowledge systems into a stronger whole. Blackfoot scholar Little Bear (2000) similarly uses the metaphor of a four-petaled flower to symbolize collective decision-making in Indigenous cultures. In this spirit, we understand co-production of knowledge as a relational process that brings Indigenous Knowledge systems and scientific frameworks into relationship while respecting their distinct epistemological foundations, creating opportunities for insights that neither could produce independently (Bartlett et al., 2012; Yua et al., 2022).

Wilson (2008) emphasized respectful relationships among researchers and between researchers and the topic itself. In practice, research unfolds like a conversation that grows with each exchange, drawing strength from collective reflection. Through sustained dialogue, shared vulnerability, and iterative analysis, collaborators stretch, challenge, and affirm one another's perspectives. This co-constructed process weaves a multivocal tapestry that honors the interplay between the individual and the collective.

We compose a collaborative story centered on relationality because we believe that "Indigenous research methods are grounded in relationships that are enhanced through storytelling" (Perron et al., 2024, p. 3). Relationality is not only a concept but a lived responsibility, contributing to "an Indigenous methodology, by looking at relational accountability or being accountable to all my relations" (Wilson, 2001, p. 177). Wildcat and Voth (2023) assert that "Indigenous relationality takes as its starting point to be the multiplicity of relationships that humans have with each other" (p. 476), extending to other-than-humans (Absolon, 2022; Lokensgard, 2010; Piiksii et al., 2024) and "is interconnected to language, culture, and ways of knowing" (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021, p. 3).

Our Flower Center

The flower center represents the self and marks where we position ourselves within methodology (Absolon, 2022). Self-reflection is a hallmark of Indigenous methodologies because researchers must make visible who they are, where they come from, and how their relationships shape the knowledge they seek to generate (Kovach, 2021). This practice aligns

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with Wilson's (2008) concept of relational accountability by recognizing that knowledge emerges through relationships and carries responsibilities to those relationships. By sharing who we are, we invite readers into relationship with us and with the story, making visible why the research matters and what truths it seeks to uncover (Gould et al., 2023).

Shawn's perspective is grounded in his experience as a non-Indigenous male from the United States. He earned his doctoral degree from Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation. He worked in public education for over 25 years, including 19 years as a school administrator and seven years on the Blackfeet Nation. The Blackfeet Nation, located in Montana, is part of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Gladstone & Pepion, 2017; Stevens et al., 2025) and carries the original name Niitsítapi, meaning "real people" (Bastien, 2004). His scholarship examines the strengths and possibilities that emerge through cross-cultural relationships and experiences that support human development. He is guided culturally by Miisamiinamska (Clark & Miisamiinamska, 2025) of the Amaskapi Pikuni, whose family cared for the Ninamska, or Medicine Pipe Bundle, and the Horn Society Bundle.

Lona's perspective is grounded in her identity as a Niitsítapi woman born and raised on the Blackfeet Nation. She earned her doctoral degree in the Teaching and Learning program at the University of Montana, where her research focuses on culturally and linguistically sustaining educational systems (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2017). Guided by a Niitsítapi worldview and responsibilities, she carries cultural and spiritual authority as a rights holder of the Ninamska, or Medicine Pipe Bundle; a leader in the Horn Society through the sacred Apakapastaan Bundle; and a former member of the Kinaksoomitaaks, or Brave Dogs Society. These roles ground her work and carry responsibilities regarding how knowledge passed through stories, songs, ceremonial transfers, and lived teachings is shared (Bruised Head, 2022).

Together, our positionalities shape how we engage in Indigenist research and carry responsibilities to the communities and knowledge systems that guide us. Our relationship began during Shawn's years as a school administrator on the Blackfeet Nation, where he first met Lona through community and educational relationships. That relationship deepened through participation in cultural and ceremonial spaces, including attendance at one of her ceremonial bundle openings. Recognizing the limits of learning through texts alone, Shawn later sought Lona's guidance to deepen his learning about Niitsítapi ways of knowing, being, and conducting research. The collaborative inquiry presented in this manuscript emerges from that ongoing teacher–learner relationship.

Our Stem

The stem, as methodological backbone, grows from the researchers' roots of self and identity (Absolon, 2022). This is where our critical consciousness rests as we unfold an Indigenized view of reflexivity. Absolon (2022) argues that scholars can use critical consciousness to challenge methodologies that undermine Indigenous identities and ways of knowing, especially in academic and educational environments that play "a vigilant role in acculturating, assimilating, and annihilating Indigenous culture, identity, traditions, and wisdom" (p. 277). In our work, critical consciousness helped us examine how Western approaches to reflexivity align or misalign with Indigenous methodologies and relational accountability.

Reflexivity is "a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes" (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023, p. 242). Critical reflexivity

extends this practice by interrogating positionality in relation to power structures shaped by colonial legacies (Diemer et al., 2016; Graeme, 2013) and by examining how positionality influences study design and outcomes (Seubert et al., 2023).

By extending critical reflexivity into relational accountability, we propose critical relational reflexivity as a practice that interrogates power and positionality while grounding research in responsibilities to relationships, communities, and the other-than-human world (Gould et al., 2023). Relational accountability provides the ethical foundation for Indigenist research by emphasizing researchers' responsibilities to all their relations (Wilson, 2008). Critical relational reflexivity extends this foundation by describing the ongoing process through which scholars examine how their positionality, assumptions, interpretations, and actions shape those relationships and how their research practices may enact, strengthen, or undermine relational accountability.

Our Leaves

The leaves represent transformation during the research journey with Indigenous methodologies. Like tending a garden, the process requires ongoing care through which meaning emerges, perspectives shift, and worldviews expand. Relationality shaped both our philosophical orientation and methodological choices. To examine how our understandings of reflexivity developed through dialogue and relationship, we drew upon collaborative, lived-experience vignettes and multilayered reflexivity. We integrated these approaches through a reflexive process that critically examined how interpretations emerged through relational, cultural, and ethical engagement, ensuring meaning-making remained attentive to context, responsibility, and our evolving positions within the inquiry.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative methodology that draws upon researchers' lived experiences as a primary source of data for examining and interpreting sociocultural meaning (Clark, 2026; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; King, 2019; Winkler, 2018). Our approach aligns with Denzin's (2018) performance autoethnography, which encourages researchers to critically engage with lived experience to examine power relations and challenge dominant ways of knowing. Building on this tradition, we employed collaborative autoethnography (Maher & Loncopán, 2024; Nisa-Waller & Piercy, 2024) as a decolonizing methodology (Chawla & Atay, 2018) that creates space to examine power, privilege, and knowledge production through relational dialogue. Rather than treating reflexivity as an individual act of self-examination, collaborative autoethnography invites participants to collectively interrogate assumptions, surface tensions across epistemological traditions, and generate new understandings through relationship.

Through our collaborative inquiry, we explored how Indigenous teachings on smudging reshaped our understanding of reflexivity through relational accountability and shared meaning-making. This orientation enabled us to examine dominant structures of knowledge and consider alternative possibilities for research relationships (Dutta, 2018; Shams, 2026). We therefore advance an understanding of reflexivity rooted not solely in individual positionality but in relational accountability and shared meaning-making (Kwame, 2017).

Autoethnographic Vignettes

Just as collaborative autoethnographies promote conceptual connections, autoethnographic vignettes (Huber, 2024) provide concise portrayals of experiences that

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illuminate perspectives, beliefs, and relationships (Miles et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021). Qualitative inquiry often uses autoethnographic vignettes to illuminate lived experiences, support reflexive engagement (Schuster, 2023), and create opportunities for collaborative interpretation and meaning-making (Pitard, 2016). These vignettes allow us to demonstrate rather than merely describe relationality and accountability (Wilson & Hughes, 2019) and serve as analytic tools for developing critical relational reflexivity within the web of relationships that shape knowledge creation.

One purpose of using autoethnographic vignettes is to invite readers into a relationship with us and our stories. This reflects the relational understanding of reality central to Indigenous research and Wilson's (2008) concept of Research Ceremony, in which knowledge emerges through relationships between the knowledge seeker and what is being learned (Wilson & Hughes, 2019). Stories are not merely narrative devices but expressions of Indigenous Knowledge that draw the teller and the listener into shared meaning-making (Adams et al., 2015; Baikie, 2020). Learning, therefore, occurs through relationship rather than distance (Absolon, 2019). The autoethnographic vignettes also demonstrate how critical relational reflexivity unfolds through the relationships that shape knowledge creation (Strega & Brown, 2015).

Our Petals

The petals symbolize the (W)holistic, diverse, and complex nature of Indigenous methodologies. Absolon (2022) describes them as "interdependent, relational and reciprocating" (p. 314). Each petal represents a knowledge portal that sometimes requires cleansing to maintain balance and integrity within the research process. Absolon (2022) explains, "Specific methodological tendencies in all of the search processes, to varying degrees, included the use of sacred medicines such as sage, cedar, tobacco, and sweetgrass to cleanse oneself and the search pathway" (p. 18). Blackfoot scholar Armstrong described how sweetgrass and smudging cleanse the knowledge portal:

> If you hold up a braid of sweetgrass, it's just sweetgrass. There is no purpose behind it until you light that sweetgrass. In our language, it becomes a purpose… a smudge. It's that smoke that journeys up…that carries our prayers…a sense of clarity and a sense of healing (Clark, 2025, p. 298).

This understanding of spirituality permeates our reflexivity framework. As one Blackfoot Elder explained, "When you're praying ... when you light your smudge, you're waking everybody up in the upper world ... the spirit world …they're called to attention to help you ... to support you ..." (Clark, 2023, p. 149). Another Elder described spirituality as "a spiritual connection to our Creator" (Clark & Wylie, 2021, p. 322). Engaging Spirit is therefore essential to reciprocity, relationality, and the honoring of knowledge.

Thinking About Smudging as a Metaphorical Threshold to Critical Relational Reflexivity

Before scholars engage critical relational reflexivity in Indigenist research, their minds must cross a metaphorical threshold embodied in the six beliefs of smudging: "(1) We smudge to clear the air around us, (2) We smudge to clean our minds so that we will have good thoughts of others, (3) We smudge our eyes so that we will only see good things in others, (4) We smudge our ears so that we will only listen to good things about others, (5) We smudge our mouths so that we will only speak well of others, (6) We smudge our whole being so that we will portray only the good part of our self through our actions" (Altieri et al., 2019, p. 4). We do not present

these six beliefs as a universal account of smudging across Indigenous Nations; rather, Lona identified them as consistent with the relational responsibilities embedded within the Niitsítapi teachings informing our collaborative inquiry.

Although we use smudging as a metaphorical threshold to explain critical relational reflexivity, we do not treat it as merely symbolic. Rather, we understand smudging as a teaching grounded in Niitsítapi ways of knowing that carries ethical, spiritual, and relational responsibilities for how researchers prepare themselves to enter relationships with people and the other-than-human world.

Aamatto'ssimaani, or smudging, signifies the beginning of a ceremony (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Crowshoe & Manneschmidt, 2002) and is "used to ask for a blessing, such as good relations with relatives or that the journey of life be long and full of kindness" (Bastien, 2004, p. 85). A ăwăamătō´osimăa, or smudge, begins by placing sweetgrass in an iiťăwăamăaťō´osimō´•ṗ' (altar) and lighting it (Clark, 2022). Sweetgrass, often described as the "hair of Mother Earth" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 197), is braided in three strands signifying sun, water, and earth (Wagner, 2018), and when used in smudging, "washes the recipient in kindness and compassion to heal the body and spirit" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 293).

For the Niitsítapi, smudging is a relational practice that creates space for a relationship with the universe and all beings within it (Bastien, 2004). Pepion (1999) shares an Elder's teaching that "by smudging the ear, the person will be able to hear and retain information that is communicated. In turn, the head and the mouth can be smudged respectively to comprehend and verbalize knowledge" (p. 151).

Translating the relational teachings associated with smudging into the critical relational reflexivity framework required considering how each of the six beliefs could inform research practice. Through story, Lona explained that the six beliefs could be understood as teachings that prepare a person to enter relationships well. Clearing the air became a matter of attention to the relational space of inquiry. Cleansing the mind became an examination of assumptions. Smudging the eyes became a commitment to seeing strength rather than a deficit. Smudging the ears became disciplined listening. Smudging the mouth became ethical speech. Smudging the whole being became alignment between intention, method, and action. In this way, smudging functioned not merely as a metaphor but as a teaching that guided Shawn's developing understanding of critical relational reflexivity.

Drawing on Nicholls' (2009) multilayered reflexivity framework, we present a critical relational reflexivity framework rooted in relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) and guided by the six beliefs of smudging (Altieri et al., 2019). The framework unfolds across three interconnected dimensions: self-relational reflexivity, interpersonal relational reflexivity, and metaphysical relational reflexivity.

Analysis unfolded through an iterative process of reflexive participant collaboration (Motulsky, 2021), reflection, and interpretation that required Shawn to reconsider assumptions about qualitative inquiry shaped by his higher education research training. Rather than beginning the analysis with his own experiences, Shawn learned to recenter the inquiry on Lona's vignettes, grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. This shift required Shawn to decenter his analytic authority and instead let Indigenous stories, teachings, and relational responsibilities shape the analytic process. Lona guided the cultural interpretation of Niitsítapi teachings, while Shawn examined how those teachings disrupted assumptions about qualitative inquiry shaped by his Western academic training. Together, we revisited the experiences represented in the vignettes by interpreting them through relational accountability, the six beliefs of smudging, and Nicholls' (2009) multilayered reflexivity framework. Through this iterative process, the three interconnected dimensions of self-relational reflexivity, interpersonal relational reflexivity, and metaphysical relational reflexivity gradually emerged.

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The vignettes that follow show how the collaboration unfolded throughout the analysis. Read sequentially, they reveal how the framework emerged through Indigenous teaching, relational engagement, and iterative interpretation rather than through a predetermined analytic process.

Self-Relational Reflexivity

Self-relational reflexivity invites scholars to examine the foundations of their thinking by tracing ideological perspectives and considering how these shape worldview. A worldview is a "mental lens" through which we perceive the world (Hart, 2010). Self-relational reflexivity provides an initial foundation for examining how researchers enter relationships with others, as introspection calls researchers to examine ways of being and to seek goodness consciously (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Through her writing, Lona taught that smudging begins before words are spoken. It first prepares the self: clearing the mind, quieting the ego, and aligning thought, breath, word, and action. For Shawn, this teaching shifted reflexivity from an intellectual exercise into a responsibility to prepare oneself before entering a relationship.

In the Niitsítapi worldview, smudging symbolizes pure love. At its heart is an understanding of Makapiii, or ego, and how it influences thoughts and behaviors. Smudging helps restore balance within the self by moderating ego. The Niitsítapi teaching of Makapiii offers a culturally grounded understanding of how ego can shape thought and behavior, emphasizing humility and relational balance. Viewed through the Two-Eyed Seeing approach informing this inquiry (Bartlett et al., 2012), this teaching can be placed in conversation with Loevinger's theory of ego development, which similarly considers how expanding perspectives and developing empathy can shape human growth (Daniels et al., 2018; Loevinger, 1976). The relationship between these perspectives is not one of validation or equivalence; rather, bringing them into dialogue allows each to remain grounded in its own epistemological and cultural foundations while illuminating points of resonance.

This dimension is grounded in aatsimoyihkaan, or sacredness of breath, which signifies alignment among thoughts, words, and actions. This alignment is essential for researchers engaging Indigenous Knowledge systems because internal reflections manifest as words and actions, each carrying energetic consequences (Bastien, 2004). Lona illustrates self-relational reflexivity through a vignette from the day she became a bundle holder of the Medicine Thunder Pipe, a sacred patrimonial item of the Niitsítapi. Bundles originate from the cosmos rather than human hands (Lokensgard, 2010), hold central knowledge-keeping roles (Zedeño et al., 2021), and embody reciprocal relationships with other-than-human beings (Lokensgard, 2010).

> As my Kaasaik (Elder) lit the smudge, she shared with me that with the right to smudge comes responsibility. The Elder was meticulous in how she handled the smudging materials, and her gentle way of teaching made me feel safe and accepted. The Elder shared that at the core of smudging is a personal relationship with Ihtstapaitapi'op, the source of life and the living energy that exists in everything, animate and inanimate (Bastien, 2004). My Elder shared that the language carries the energy of Ihtstapaitapi'op, and so does how we use our voice. She emphasized that I must always be responsible with my words and with how I use my voice.

This vignette illustrates self-relational reflexivity as a process of aligning thought, word, and action through aatsimoyihkaan, the sacredness of breath. Rather than treating reflexivity as a purely cognitive exercise, the experience shows how scholars continually examine ego,

intention, and responsibility before entering research relationships. The teachings associated with smudging reveal that reflexivity begins with an internal commitment to approach knowledge, people, and other-than-human beings with humility, balance, and accountability.

Through story, Lona explained that the six beliefs of smudging could also be understood as teachings for preparing oneself to enter relationships with knowledge in a good way. As Shawn reflected on these teachings, they became practical lessons for self-relational reflexivity. Rather than viewing reflexivity solely as critical self-examination, these teachings reframed it as a process of preparing one's thoughts, perceptions, words, and actions before engaging in research relationships. Recognizing that thoughts, perceptions, words, and actions carry consequences became central to Shawn's developing understanding of self-relational reflexivity. From these teachings, Shawn learned:

- I smudge to clear my mind, reminding myself that research begins by examining my assumptions and intentions.
- I smudge to cultivate good thoughts, encouraging me to recognize how my worldview shapes what I notice, question, and value.
- I smudge my eyes, teaching me to look beyond deficits and to seek the strengths, wisdom, and humanity present in others.
- I smudge my ears, reminding me that understanding begins with listening rather than explaining.
- I smudge my mouth, teaching me to speak about people, communities, and knowledge with care and respect.
- I smudge my whole being, reminding me that reflexivity is ultimately measured through action rather than reflection alone.

Interpersonal Relational Reflexivity

Interpersonal relational reflexivity invites scholars to examine how self is shaped through relationships with others. This aligns with Niitsítapi values, where "cooperation—a'tsoo'tsi'kakimaan, (combining our efforts) is valued over competition and it is in this spirit of cooperation/collaboration, a'tso'tsi'kakiimatop (when everybody works on something together)" (Atwood et al., 2024, p. 774) that scholars exchange ideas. Reflexivity here concerns research with Indigenous people, by Indigenous people, and for the benefit of Indigenous communities as co-facilitators of knowledge creation (Kwame, 2017).

This dimension asks researchers to evaluate whether they are genuine collaborators rather than authorities, controllers, or delegators (Nicholls, 2009). Such work requires peeling back layers of thought to reveal how worldview contributes to the "'us-them' power divide and the perceived benefits of research outcomes to Indigenous peoples or communities" (Kwame, 2017, p. 220).

Lona explained that smudging prepares a person to enter relationships with humility. Smudging the eyes, ears, and mouth is not merely symbolic; it teaches the researcher to see others generously, listen without control, and speak with care. For Shawn, this teaching reframed collaboration as a practice of receiving knowledge rather than directing inquiry.

Lona offers an account of learning Niitsítapi ways of knowing and being from Elders as she began to understand her culture's epistemology. She first had to learn how to approach Elders with respect, light a smudge, ask a question, and listen as a learner. She shares:

> The first Elder I approached responded to my question about why our people say we are a matriarchal society by telling me a story. He spoke at length, yet he never directly answered what I had asked. I thought maybe he didn't understand the question, so I waited for him to pause,

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> and then quickly interrupted to ask the question again more directly. The Elder started telling me a story again and spoke at great length. I felt annoyed. Much of the time the Elder was talking, I kept thinking about how I could get him to respond more directly to my question.
> After the conversation ended, I was very confused. I remember telling my husband, "The Elder just kept telling me the same story over and over." This happened many times thereafter during interactions with Elders. It didn't occur to me until later that the Elders were sharing knowledge through methods of storytelling, and I didn't understand that my role was to make meaning as I listened. I was expecting a direct response to the question. It took time for me to learn that this was a relationship between myself, the Elder, and the knowledge. This is why the Elders smudged their mind, their eyes, their mouth, their ears, and their heart, so that they could be open to share the knowledge that is meant to be shared, and I had to do the same so that I was open to the knowledge—Knowledge is energy.

This vignette illustrates interpersonal relational reflexivity by showing how knowledge emerges through relationships rather than through information acquisition alone. The experience challenged assumptions shaped by Western educational traditions and required Lona to reposition herself from questioner to listener, emphasizing the relational responsibilities that accompany knowledge seeking. Through this process, reflexivity becomes an ongoing examination of how researchers participate in, influence, and are transformed by relationships with knowledge keepers, communities, and the knowledge itself.

As our conversations continued, Lona explained that smudging also prepares a person for relationships with others. She described the six beliefs as teachings that help create the conditions necessary for respectful engagement with Elders, community members, knowledge keepers, and fellow scholars. Through this lens, reflexivity became less about understanding oneself in isolation and more about learning how to participate ethically in shared meaning-making. From these teachings, Shawn learned:

- We smudge to clear the space between ourselves and others, creating conditions for respectful relationship.
- We smudge to cultivate good thoughts, helping us approach others without judgment or predetermined conclusions.
- We smudge our eyes, teaching us to recognize strengths and gifts before identifying problems.
- We smudge our ears, reminding us to listen deeply for meanings that may not be immediately apparent.
- We smudge our mouths, encouraging us to speak in ways that honor rather than diminish relationships.
- We smudge our whole being, teaching us that trustworthy relationships are built through consistent actions over time.

Metaphysical Relational Reflexivity

Metaphysical relational reflexivity extends accountability to the natural world, other-than-humans, and the cosmos. Within the Indigenous relational ontologies informing this inquiry, particularly the Niitsítapi teachings shared throughout this manuscript, relationships extend among the physical world (Wagner, 2018), other-than-humans (Lokensgard, 2010), and the cosmos (Wilson, 2007). This relational animacy reflects a broader understanding that all

elements of the natural world are alive, interconnected, and capable of agency (Atwood et al., 2024; Blaser, 2009; Little Bear, 2000; Piiksii et al., 2024; TallBear, 2015). This dimension recognizes knowledge as emerging through relationships grounded in living harmoniously with the natural world (Bastien, 2004).

Lona taught that smudging opens awareness to relationships beyond the human. Through this teaching, land and other-than-human beings are not background context but active participants in knowledge-making. For Shawn, this expanded reflexivity beyond positionality and into accountability to the wider relational world.

Dream knowledge is central to metaphysical-relational reflexivity because dreams transform reality and add to cultural experience (Shawanda & Manitowabi, 2023). Dreams provide pathways to ancestral wisdom and evidence of Spirit's presence in Indigenist inquiries (Shawanda, 2020), carrying Indigenous methodologies beyond the mind as spirits travel through the metaphysical world (Absolon, 2022; Deloria, 2012). Lona illustrates this through a dream experienced during a 2018 visit to the American Museum of Natural History while exploring repatriation under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990):

> That night, I had a vivid dream about a baby lying by the side of the road, dressed only in a soiled diaper, cold and hungry. I picked him up and wept as I tried to warm him in my arms. I then took him home, bathed him, clothed him, and fed him. The bond I felt was immediate and intense, and although I knew someone would eventually come for him, I didn't want to let him go. I woke up with tears streaming down my face, convinced that the dream was connected to one of the bundles I had seen at the museum. One Elder told me she had dreamed the same thing the first time she visited a museum in Canada for repatriation, and our dreams were similar. The Elder said that she often dreamed about babies and that this was how the bundles communicated. The dream returned to me several times, and I came to understand it as the bundle wanting to go home. In 2024, the bundle was finally returned and entrusted to a new couple who became its holders. Many other women who have taken bundles report similar dreams about babies, which they read as signs that the bundles communicate across time and place. Through this experience, I learned that my dreams are often bundles speaking to me.

This vignette illustrates metaphysical relational reflexivity by highlighting how knowledge can emerge through relationships that extend beyond the human world. Rather than viewing dreams as private psychological experiences, the account positions them as relational encounters through which bundles, ancestors, and other-than-human beings communicate teachings and responsibilities. The vignette demonstrates that reflexivity within Indigenist research involves remaining accountable not only to human communities but also to the broader network of spiritual, ecological, and cosmological relationships that participate in knowledge creation.

As our conversations continued, Lona explained that smudging also prepares a person to recognize relationships with the Creator, land, bundles, dreams, and other-than-human beings. Through these teachings, Shawn came to understand that reflexivity extends beyond human relationships to include accountability to a wider relational world. From these teachings, Shawn learned:

- We smudge to clear space between ourselves and the cosmos to open a spiritual pathway to the other-than-humans.

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- We smudge to open our minds to the truth that these other-than-humans walk beside us in relationships.
- We smudge our eyes so that we may see the presence of the other-than-humans as relatives worthy of reverence.
- We smudge our ears to listen with humility to the guidance offered by the other-than-humans.
- We smudge our mouths so that the words we speak honor the agency of the other-than-human world.
- We smudge our whole being so that how we think and how we act reflect a way of life grounded in balance with the natural world and the network of relationships we share with other-than-human beings who help sustain and guide us.

Critical Inquiry

This critical relational reflexivity framework prepares scholars to engage meaningfully in Indigenist research by inviting scholars to unlearn colonial research norms (Kovach, 2021; Nisa-Waller & Piercy, 2024) and reorient toward Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Smith, 2021). Through this reorientation, the framework shifts reflexivity from the researcher's interior consciousness to the relationships for which the researcher is responsible. Self-relational reflexivity emphasizes accountability for how scholars prepare themselves to enter research relationships; interpersonal relational reflexivity extends that accountability to how scholars participate in relationships with others; and metaphysical relational reflexivity extends responsibility beyond human relationships to the wider relational world. Smudging provides the teaching through which these interconnected responsibilities become visible, positioning reflexivity not simply as self-examination but as an ongoing relational responsibility.

Importantly, the framework should not be understood as universal or as a method detached from the relationships that produced it. It is a relationally situated framework that emerged through collaborative autoethnography, Lona's teaching, and Shawn's ongoing learning about how to enter scholarship that moves away from epistemic extraction and toward relational research methods (Wildcat & Voth, 2023).

For non-Indigenous scholars, this framework requires more than reflexive awareness of privilege. It calls researchers to engage Indigenous methodologies through relationships characterized by complex accountability (Starblanket, 2018). In practice, this means moving beyond viewing reflexivity as an individual exercise and instead understanding it as an ongoing responsibility to relationships with Indigenous communities and knowledge systems (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021). Such engagement requires researchers to continually examine how their assumptions, actions, and research practices either reinforce or challenge colonial patterns of knowledge production.

This framework does not flatten differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews. Instead, it requires researchers to position themselves relationally with the people, knowledge systems, and communities involved (Brayboy & Lucero, 2023). By aligning with (W)holistic teachings (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021), the six beliefs of smudging (Altieri et al., 2019), and layered reflexivity (Nicholls, 2009), critical relational reflexivity contributes to a critical methodology that champions Indigenous self-determination and tribal sovereignty (TallBear, 2013).

Concluding Thoughts

This manuscript began with a question about reflexivity within Indigenist research, but through dialogue, it became a story about unlearning. The Indigenous teachings shared throughout this inquiry challenged assumptions about research shaped by Shawn's academic training. Much of that training emphasized reflexivity as an individual act of self-examination, the researcher as the primary site of interpretation, and knowledge as something acquired through observation, analysis, and critique (Nisa-Waller & Piercy, 2024). While these approaches encourage awareness of positionality, the teachings associated with smudging revealed a different understanding of reflexivity grounded in relationality and an Indigenous way of being.

The disruption began at the level of self (Moosavi, 2022). Rather than approaching reflexivity as an intellectual exercise focused on identifying bias, the teachings of smudging emphasized preparation for a relationship (Armstrong, 2021). Shawn came to understand that thoughts, words, intentions, and actions carry consequences and that reflexivity begins before entering the Research Ceremony (Wilson, 2008). This understanding challenged assumptions that critical awareness alone is sufficient for ethical inquiry. Instead, self-relational reflexivity emerged as a responsibility to align thought, word, and action in ways that honor relationships with people, knowledge, and community.

The teachings also disrupted assumptions about how knowledge is produced (Chawla & Atay, 2018). Western academic training often positions researchers as questioners, analysts, and interpreters who seek answers through systematic investigation (Macdonald et al., 2023). Through stories shared by Lona, Shawn encountered a different orientation in which knowledge emerges through relationships rather than extraction. Listening became more important than directing inquiry, and humility became more important than expertise. Interpersonal relational reflexivity, therefore, challenged inherited assumptions about authority, replacing them with responsibilities to receive, honor, and reciprocate knowledge shared by others.

Perhaps the most significant disruption involved relationships beyond the human world (Piiksii et al., 2024). Shawn’s academic training largely treated knowledge as a human endeavor grounded in empirical observation and rational analysis. Lona’s teachings on smudging introduced a broader understanding of relationality, in which dreams, land, and other-than-human beings (Wehi et al., 2023) actively participate in knowledge creation. This expanded understanding challenged the boundaries of conventional reflexivity by extending accountability beyond human relationships and toward a wider network of living relations.

The critical relational reflexivity framework presented in this manuscript emerged from these disruptions (Dutta, 2018), documenting how Indigenous teachings reshaped one scholar's understanding of what it means to engage ethically in Indigenist research (Smith, 2021). Beyond its contribution to Indigenist scholarship, the framework demonstrates how Indigenous teachings can reshape understandings of reflexivity within critical methodology.

This manuscript therefore contributes not only a framework for critical relational reflexivity but also an example of how relational learning can reshape qualitative methodology. In this respect, it illustrates the kind of relational learning that Kovach (2021) envisioned, in which a non-Indigenous scholar does not reinterpret Indigenous methodologies through Western assumptions but instead learns through sustained relationship with an Indigenous scholar whose teachings are grounded in Niitsítapi ways of knowing and being. Rather than offering a universal model of reflexivity, the resulting framework emerged not from methodological extraction but from relational accountability, reciprocal learning, and a shared commitment to ethical inquiry.

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Table 1
Glossary

Blackfoot Language	Definition
aamatto'ssimaani	The act of smudging
Aatsimoyihkaan	Sacredness of breath
a'tsoo'tsi'kakimaan	Combining our efforts
a'tso'tsi'kakiimatop	When everybody works on something together
ăwăamăẗō´osimăa	Smudge
Ihtstapaitapi'op	The source of life
iiẗăwăamăatō´osimō´•ṗ'	Altar
Kaasaik	Elder
Kinaksoomitaaks	Brave Dogs
Makapiii	Ego
Natoosii	Sun

Note. Blackfoot language terms are listed in alphabetical order.

Author Contributions Statement

Both authors contributed equally to this manuscript, including its conceptualization, methodology, analysis, and writing. Shawn and Lona collaboratively developed the critical relational reflexivity framework presented in this work, jointly conducted the autoethnographic inquiry, and shared responsibility for drafting, reviewing, and revising the manuscript. Both authors approved the final version for submission.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

N/A

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. The two authors were the only participants in this study, and both were informed about the purpose of the research and provided informed consent prior to their participation. In addition to conventional research ethics, the inquiry was guided by relational accountability. Lona retained authority over the representation and sharing of Niitsítapi cultural knowledge, stories, and teachings included in the manuscript.

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Notes on Contributors

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Lona Running Wolf is from the Blackfeet Nation, located in Montana. She earned her doctoral degree in the Teaching and Learning program at the University of Montana, where her research focuses on culturally and linguistically sustaining educational systems. Over her twelve years in education, she has worked as an elementary school teacher, instructional coach, and instructional leader, and she has partnered with Indigenous schools throughout Montana, first as Director of American Indian Student Achievement and currently as a consultant through her company, 4Poles Education. She is also the Executive Project Director of Blackfeet Eco

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