



## **Re-story, Research, and Reclaim Indigenous Sexualities and Relations**

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## Recovering Good Relations

Settler-colonial states such as the US and Canada consume the world. We now live in what some call the Anthropocene—a terrestrial epoch defined by the wrenching effects that humans are having on the environment we share with many other beings. Each day, we are greeted with new scientific warnings that the Earth is warming more quickly than expected, that many coastal cities will be lost by the century's end, that large swathes of the planet will be too hot or arid to inhabit, and that we will lose countless companion species, many of which we depend on. As the world seems to fail around us, we seek painful pleasure in popular culture's post-apocalyptic visions. We read books, watch films and television, and play video games in which we go along for a gore-filled ride. We imagine ourselves as survivors and dull our growing sense of vulnerability. Yet many of these escapist visions retain the viciousness of a settler-colonial world pre-apocalypse. They exhibit the same racial, gender, heteronormative, and monogamist categories and hierarchies. They reproduce Western ideas of human dominion over animal life, and human-centric notions of sentience. We cling to them despite their proven contributions to the dangers we face. These visions give us temporary pleasures, but they won't save us.

On a planet ravaged by an unsustainable complex of gendered and racial hierarchies, state policy supports and promotes nuclear family forms tied to private property and monogamous marriage. Indigenous kinship ideas based in extended kin relations, relatedness, and collective well-being order things differently. Many Indigenous peoples never fully accepted the impositions of a Western hierarchy of life, and continue to build kinship networks among myriad species. If taken seriously, Indigenous conceptual frameworks could help shape broader knowledges and practices in ways that might lessen global devastation.

. Indigenous peoples have been post-apocalyptic since Contact. We have survived under conditions of extreme duress. Our histories preserve valuable frameworks for living in what I call “relational sustainability”, worlds ordered by complex webs of kin relations, gender pluralities, non-monogamies, collective land-sharing, and other forms of wealth distribution. The Dakota principles with which I was raised and Cree principles that story the land I now inhabit also assume more-than-human relations as part of our extended kin networks. They assume the relatedness of all beings. Many Indigenous peoples understand that agency is distributed widely amongst human and other-than-human beings, including things not considered to be living in Western frameworks.

Non-Indigenous scholars and activists are articulating resonant ideas. Queer theorist Mel Chen suggests that seeing and understanding matter differently will help us interrogate the (non)sensibilities of the animacy hierarchy in which humans—especially certain humans among us—are viewed as more vibrant and always naturally more agential than some other humans and all nonhuman beings. New materialist theorist Jane Bennett calls for Western thinkers to recognize the “common materiality of all that is.” She argues that understanding the interconnections among all things can help change how we humans see our place in the world, and therefore how we intervene in political and environmental problems.

## Re-story

Indigenous narratives of being in “good relation” are at the heart of my Trudeau Fellowship project. I will establish the RELAB research-creation laboratory to conduct social science and humanities scholarship and creative practice aimed at restoring good relations among our kin, both human and other-than-human. This work connects to the work of the Indigenous Science, Technology, and Society research and training hub ([www.IndigenousSTS.com](http://www.IndigenousSTS.com)), that I founded under the umbrella of my Canada Research Chair (CRC) in Indigenous Peoples, Technoscience, and Environment. The Indigenous STS group uses a similar philosophy of restoring and building goods relation as we focus on Indigenous involvement in and governance of genome research, and other STEM fields and projects. We promote Kim TallBear. The RELAB

collaborative, less hierarchical scientific research projects guided by Indigenous philosophies and priorities. We work with scientists and Indigenous communities in Canada, the US, New Zealand, Australia, and globally to train Indigenous people to do and govern science and technology development.

## **Research-Create: the RELAB**

Previously distinct bodies of work braid together to form the foundation for RELAB. **The RELAB will foreground Indigenous theories, standpoints, and self-determination in projects that blend ethnographic and archival research with creative work. RELAB projects will aim to re-story the colonial terrain, challenging civilizing and hierarchical settler narratives with Indigenous narratives of damaged relations.** RELAB projects will simultaneously reclaim Indigenous sexual and environmental relations as good relations, serving as a research-creation incubator for the making of better human and planetary relations. RELAB will draw on the knowledges and practices of Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty, students, creative workers, and other collaborators from its home base at the University of Alberta, the surrounding Treaty 6 Indigenous communities, and beyond.

RELAB will provide our members with the means to centralize creative practice as a means of generating and sharing Indigenous kin-making concepts.

**The plan is to build a research-creation incubator space in or near to the downtown Edmonton University of Alberta campus.** In 2018, we will submit a proposal to the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI) to fund the development of a lab, meeting, and office space combined with a simple recording space for podcasts and rehearsal/performance space. We will work closely with University of Alberta colleagues in upper administration, the Faculty of Arts, and the Faculty of Extension (who already have space downtown) as well as artists in Edmonton and Indigenous media producers to determine current facilities that can be shared, and new facilities that are needed to fully realize the RELAB vision. We will develop a model that can also raise revenue to support facilities and staff.

The overarching goal in developing the RELAB is to enhance capacity among Indigenous thinkers and creators and our allies for doing work that supports Indigenous self-determination and which is compelling within and beyond the academy.

The RELAB idea is coalescing around several core projects:

***The Confessions Shows.*** Founded in December 2015 along with co-producers Dr. Bear and University of Alberta Aboriginal Governance Administrator Kirsten Lindquist, the *Tipi Confessions* sexy storytelling show is a rapidly expanding initiative in Edmonton and across Canada that co-evolved with social science and humanities research undertaken by our faculty and students related to decolonial sexualities and place-based relations. *Tipi Confessions* features Indigenous and non-Indigenous storytellers and performers, raucous audience participation, and sex positive education. Our sponsors/collaborating sex educators have included organizations and businesses including HIV Edmonton; YouthCo (Youth Leading the HIV & HEP C Movement); QMunity (BC's Queer Resource Centre); Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN); the Traveling Tickle Trunk (Edmonton); and Womyn's Ware (Vancouver).

*Tipi Confessions* is produced several times a year in Edmonton, in cities across Canada, and internationally. We have mounted several shows in Edmonton as well as shows at UBC, and have shows scheduled in Los Angeles and New Zealand. We are being asked with increasing frequency to produce similar shows with other communities, including the OUTSaskatoon, the Talking Stick Aboriginal Arts Festival, the Toronto Queer Film Festival and the Jokkmokk Sámi Winter Market. The Jokkmokk show and related academic works will focus on disruptions to Sámi lifeways, including gender roles and intimate human relations as well as nonhuman relations, from mining and hydropower development. This show will follow a five-year collaboration with Sámi researchers that began with two symposia, *Co-Constituting Indigenous Academic/Artistic Knowledges and Understandings of Land, Water, and Body*,

*and Labscapes; Uppsala Supradisciplinary Feminist TechnoScience Symposia*, held at Uppsala University in 2012 and 2013.

Additionally, RELAB faculty have been asked by scientists and science institutions such as the Summer Internship for Indigenous Peoples in Genomics and the Telus World of Science in Edmonton to work with them to produce *Confessions* shows oriented around the science of sex, and critiques of the role of science in colonial projects. Entitled *Sexy Science Confessions*, RELAB will use these productions to bring Indigenous, feminist, and queer critiques of scientific hierarchies to the stage and page.

***Indigenous Burlesque Collective.*** *Tipi Confessions* sparked the founding of the *Beaver Hills Burlesque Collective* by co-producer Kirsten Lindquist and University of Alberta Native Studies graduate student, Brittany Johnson. The Indigenous burlesque troupe and associated workshops is described by its founders as “an Indigenous-feminist trickster practice of decolonizing gender and sexuality.” Dancers are also researchers who co-produce theoretical analyses with performances. They explore how Indigenous feminist/queer approaches to burlesque education and performance subvert and satirize heteropatriarchal settler colonial/capitalist gender and sexuality norms. Originating from political parody and commentary of Victorian gender norms and upper-class art and politics, burlesque integrates comedy, entertainment, music, and dance to resist normativity. In unsettling the ‘origins’ of burlesque, the *Beaver Hills Burlesque Collective* roots itself in “trickster discourse”, embodied by many Indigenous artists and performers who challenge colonial violence. The *Beaver Hills Burlesque Collective* will be housed at RELAB and help build experiential and subjective spaces and structures for storytelling through body sovereignty and movement.

***Indigenous-Feminist Futures.*** A collaboration with feminist filmmaker Kami Chisholm (*Pride Denied* 2016) and co-founder of the Toronto Queer Film Festival, will result in a documentary centered on conversations between Indigenous feminists who do research and creative work related to Indigenous futurisms and Indigenous science fiction. The film will examine contemporary Indigenous thought related to social and environmental crisis, Indigenous resilience, and decolonial visions of Indigenous futures in an anthropogenic age.

***Student Research.*** RELAB will support innovative research-creation by emerging student scholars. Planned dissertations include one focusing on the need for Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) strategies to address the disruption of Indigenous sexualities; a dissertation co-produced with community beadwork circles; and third graduate research project on computer hardware designed according to Indigenous ethics for empathetic and ethically conscious AI.

## **RELAB Launch and Organization**

To build the RELAB as a research-creation hub at the University of Alberta for Indigenous and ally scholars and artists/performers, we plan eight start-up activities.

The proposed activities involve the co-constitution of research and creative work that will increase our understanding of research-creation methodologies, enable us to contribute to and make innovations in research-creation, and simultaneously contribute such methodologies to our collective work that promotes Indigenous cultural and political self-determination.

**1. Hire a RELAB Research Assistant.** The first priority will be to hire a research assistant to assist with administering RELAB activities including seeking additional funding for pre- and postdoctoral fellowships and ongoing publications and symposia. Kirsten Lindquist, M.A., FNS Aboriginal Governance Administrator and *Tipi Confessions* co-producer, who begins her PhD in our faculty in Fall 2018, will serve in this capacity. Lindquist’s own PhD research links the *Tipi Confessions* show to the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Calls to Action. Part of her PhD research-creation work will be, in addition to helping produce the show, to engage with TRC themes of Indigenous bodies, genders, and sexualities beyond the pathological discourses of sexual assaults and abuses related to residential school

trauma. Her proposed dissertation work, “Acts of Sex-conciliation: A Research-creation Approach to Representing and Reconciling Sustainable Relations,” will expand this dialogue by demonstrating how despite their crucial importance TRC narratives reproduce a pathological or victim-based discourse about Indigenous sexuality. *Tipi Confessions*, conversely, takes a strengths-based, decolonial approach in performatively modeling the multitude of experiences around Indigenous sexualities.

**2. Launch Symposium: *Making Good Relations: Decolonial Environments and Sexualities*.** The laboratory will officially launch in Spring 2019 with a two-day symposium that elicits papers, performances, and exhibits from both established scholars and artists as well as students from across Canada, and globally. We will solicit submissions from already affiliated RELAB scholars as well as do an open call internationally. The conference will feature two plenary speakers to lead each day, one academic and one non-academic speaker, but both of whom can be characterized as doing research-creation work in the service of decolonizing environments and/or sexualities.

**3. Annual Research/Creation Innovation Lecture: *Making Good Relations: Decolonial Environments and Sexualities*.** An annual research-creation lecture by the same name as the symposium will commence in Fall 2019 and will continue indefinitely each Fall semester at the University of Alberta campus. A scholar/artist of international reputation or a very innovative but lesser known scholar and/or artist whose work can be characterized as at least in part research-creation, and which falls within the broad analytic foreground by the RELAB, will be invited to campus for a public lecture and/or performance/panel combination. They will also meet with graduate students. Given that top scholars book out at least a year in advance for invited lectures, we envision launching this lecture in Fall 2019.

**4. Special Journal Issue on *Making Good Relations: Decolonial Environments and Sexualities*.** The RELAB will consult with the executive editors of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) journal to produce a special issue on this topic featuring both research and creative work and including multimedia content. We expect to be able to produce this issue—with RELAB investigators as editors—by Fall of 2020.

**5. *Tipi Confessions* shows related to decolonial environments and sexualities.** Described in detail earlier in this proposal, the *Tipi Confessions* shows are moving from primarily human sexuality themes to also foreground “land-body” connections. Especially younger Indigenous, feminist, and queer thinkers are theorizing the connections between violence to the planet and violence to Indigenous women’s and other marginalized bodies. The intersections between environment and sexuality are fertile ground for the research-creation work we envision. This new direction will be centered in further development of the show, both productions associated with academic symposia and shows not affiliated with academic events. Academic shows are open to the public and draw a diverse audience despite their sometimes scholarly undertones. The non-academic shows continue to embody our intellectual ethic informed by Indigenous, queer, and feminist theories, but have fewer scholarly references-

**6. *Tipi Confessions* theatre cooperative.** In order to manage the business of the *Tipi Confessions* shows, we will organize a theatre co-op that will allow us to do some of the show administration outside of the university administrative structure. This allows more efficiency in booking and paying performers and venues. We are seeking advice from theatre department colleagues here at the University of Alberta.

**7. *Tipi Confessions* writing & performance workshops.** The *Tipi Confessions* dramaturge, University of Alberta Professor of Drama, director, and playwright, Donia Mounsef, proposes writing and performance workshops with artists who submit pitches for *Tipi Confessions* performances.

**8. RELAB Podcasts.** Beginning in 2019, the RELAB will produce a podcast that features not only relevant *Tipi Confessions* stories and performances that address the re-constitution of good relations, but the podcast will include audio of our distinguished lectures, and scholarly interviews with our speakers

and with intellectuals globally. RELAB researchers travel frequently in Indigenous, scholarly, artistic, and activist communities internationally. We will conceive of innovative formats for capturing audio from thinkers globally to include in our podcasts. As a regular podcaster on *Media Indigena*, I will secure technical assistance on podcast production from Rick Harp, *Media Indigena* host. The RELAB research assistant and my current Web design assistant will assist in podcast production.

### **RELAB Knowledge Dissemination**

In addition, to the multiple dissemination strategies noted throughout this proposal (performances, documentary film, special journal issue, distinguished public lectures, eventual research monographs and articles, and the RELAB podcast), faculty and staff affiliated with RELAB prioritize media engagement. For example, I am extensively engaged with media in Canada, the US, and internationally. I have published popular articles in venues such as *BuzzFeed*, *Indian Country Today*, and *GeneWatch*. I am a frequent blogger and I tweet (as do collaborators) on issues related to Indigenous peoples, science, technology, arts/performance, and culture. I am a frequent commentator in the media on issues related to Indigenous peoples, science, and culture, including interviews in *New Scientist*, *The New York Times*, *Native America Calling*, *National Geographic*, *Scientific American*, *The Atlantic*, *NPR*, *CBC News*, *BBC World Service*, and *CTV*. I am a regular roundtable member on the *Media Indigena* podcast hosted by Rick Harp. In addition to working with established media contacts in Canada, the US, UK and elsewhere, the RELAB will work with University of Alberta Communications staff and with editors at popular science and popular culture, feminist, environmental, and Indigenous outlets to place opinion pieces and creative nonfiction essays and other creative works related to our research-creation.

### **Reclaim**

In the face of violent human practices and extreme social and environmental change, we must conceive of new ways of living with Earth. The RELAB will work toward conceptual and social change by building upon the strong foundations of seemingly disparate multidisciplinary inquiries. We braid together Indigenous Studies of science and technology, decolonizing sexualities, environmental justice scholarship, social media activism, and research-creation theories to interrogate settler forms of relating—be those environmental relations, sexuality, or kinship constructs. RELAB projects push back against settler arrangements of humans and nonhumans into inherently violent hierarchies of civilized versus savage, culture versus nature, human versus animal, and man versus woman. RELAB projects seek to weave relationally back together what the West has torn asunder. Settler environmentalism, racisms, species-isms, and sexualities and their unsustainable practices and frameworks do not only harm humans, but they harm the planet. The RELAB will develop visions in the form of performances, publications, material culture, curricula, media, and eventually policy interventions in which expansive Indigenous concepts of kin serve as provocations for moving (back? forward?) into more sustainable and just human and planetary relations.

## Trudeau Fellowship Budget: Years 1-3

This is a partial budget for proposed activities. Additional funds will be sought on campus (e.g. the Kule Institute for Advanced Study – KIAS) and through external grants (e.g. SSHRC), to complete activities.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	TOTAL
<b>1) Professional support</b>				
Grad student (8K/term)	24,000	24,000	24,000	72,000
Web design/support	2,500	1,000	1,000	4,500
<b>2) Travel (non foundation)</b>				
Grad Student conferences, including Travel to <i>Tipi Confessions</i> New Zealand (2019)	3,500	2,000	2,000	7,500
<b>3) Electronic &amp; technical supplies</b>				
Computer equipment	2,500			
Audio equipment	1,000			3,500
<b>4) Knowledge dissemination</b>				
Journal fees				
2,000				
2,000				
<b>5) RELAB launch symposium</b>				
- Plenary speakers honorarium				10,000
& expenses (2 x \$5,000)				
- Conference center rental				5,000
- Advertisement				1,500
- Entertainment/reception				5,000
- Elder protocol/gifts				500
- Catering				3,000
25,000				
<b>6) Annual Research-Creation Innovation Lecture &amp; workshop (initial 3 years)</b>				
Travel, accommodations & per diem, honoraria, on-campus space rental, advertisement, catering.				