Topics, Explanations, and Questions to Inspire Thought

1) *In the Beginning...Once Upon Turtle Island*

When Indigenous people tell their creation story, it starts with a woman who falls from the sky, and lands on the back of a turtle. She can’t swim, and the whole planet is just a big puddle at this point, so the animals help her find some mud from the bottom of the ocean. She spreads the mud on the back of the turtle, and sings and dances the land to life. It’s a story about collaboration and teamwork, gratitude, and creativity.

Roots must first start as seeds. Our identities grows from the origin stories of our culture. Find a poem that talks about creation from an Indigenous perspective.

2) *Mino Bimaadiziwin: Living The Good Life*

The Anishinaabe people have a word for “the Good Life.” Mino bimaadiziwin is about the many ways there are to live well as an ongoing process of re-birth, renewal, and a balance between give/take. What is your definition of the good life?

Rootedness involves being connected to purpose. Find a poem that talks about the purpose of a good life, and the importance of living well.

3) *Appropriation: Asking Permission, and Only Taking What is Freely Given*

Cultural appropriation is the act of taking from a culture without permission. So much has been taken forcibly from First Nations people including their lands, their traditions, their languages, and their lives...the last thing we want to do in our attempts to honour what remains of their culture, is take what remains. What do you think of this concept of appropriation? Where do we draw the lines, and how do we ask permission to engage?

Rootedness in culture is an important part of identity. Find a poem that talks about honouring cultural practices without theft, or one that engages with appropriation.

4) *What is a treaty?*

The Indigenous definition of a treaty involves relationship. Boundaries are much wider than lines, they’re more like zones. Imagine two big overlapping territories of shared responsibility. Treaties help us navigate our relationships with other people and the land.

Understanding our boundaries and responsibilities helps us stay grounded and firm in our own identity, and in what we value. Find a poem that talks about treaties, and the idea of shared responsibility between people and species.
5) **Cowboys and Indians (and Other Stereotypes)**

Many depictions of Indigenous people are flat, unexciting, and unidimensional. Stereotypes are harmful, and incomplete representations.

Stereotypes strip people of deep rich identities. Find a poem that engages with stereotypes, or perhaps one that helps you to shed an old stereotypical view.

6) **Humor, Comedy, and the Importance of Laughter**

Aboriginal humor is more than just a way of dealing with anger and frustration, humor was a part of Native culture long before first contact. There are traditional ceremonies which incorporate humor, and many cultural stories are intentionally funny, which was actually what got in the way of colonizers seeing the stories, lessons and ceremonies as serious. In the words of Drew Hayden Taylor, an Ojibway comedian and writer, “learning through laughter has been a part of Aboriginal culture since the beginning.”

Do laughter, jokes, and humor add anything to your understanding of Indigenous people? What does this do to the stereotypical image of the stoic and serious Native American, always unsmiling? Being rooted in culture and identity helps ensure humor is inclusive and invitational, not rude or ignorant. Find a poem that captures Indigenous humor.

7) **Teachings of the Medicine Wheel**

The Medicine Wheel is a representation of the circle of life. There are over 100 different teachings and traditions inside this one image. It represents the four directions, the four directions, the four elements of life, the four medicines, the four seasons, the four states of well-being, the four colours of man, and four stages of life.

What can the medicine wheel teach us about being rooted and grounded in the lessons and teachings of people who came before us (elders, grandparents etc.)? Find a poem that talks about the wisdom of the Medicine Wheel.

8) **The Democracy of Species: who are the Tree People?**

Indigenous worldview sees trees—and all other living species—as people too. This is sometimes referred to as “the democracy of species” because all living things have a voice and deserve a seat at the table. This is why Indigenous people believe the Earth must be asked for permission before we take from her. There are many Indigenous ceremonies which display gratitude to the Earth for its many gifts, and honour the personality and wisdom of all living things.
Trees give us a perfect demonstration of what it means to be rooted. Find a poem which reflects the nature of trees as people.

9) *What Did You Call Me?*

Many of the children who attended residential schools were renamed. They were stripped of their traditional names, spoken in their original languages, and made to answer to new English names.

Names are a source of identity, tying us to our home and families. Find a poem that talks about naming, the loss of a name, or the process of being renamed.

10) *“I will not speak Cree” and Other Tongue-Ties*

Many Indigenous children were beaten and punished for speaking their traditional languages in the residential schools. Consider for a moment that all your thoughts, jokes, prayers, and ways of understanding the world are all contained in a single language. English, for example. Can you imagine being punished for communicating in that language?

Reflect on the way rootedness is tied to our mother-tongues and first language. Find a poem that engages with the lost languages of the First Peoples.

11) *Residential schools: Scrubbing Brown Skin Raw*

Many stories told by residential school survivors portray the way children were taught to think of their brown skin as dirty. The nuns in the residential schools scrubbed the children’s skin in an effort to “cleanse” them. Some children were scrubbed until they bled, and their long braided hair was cut short.

What does it mean to be rooted in your physical body? Find a poem about the way colonizers enforced a certain way of looking and dressing on Indigenous people.

12) *“Kill the Indian in the Child” (Assimilation and Cultural Genocide)*

Duncan Campbell Scott was the head of Indian Affairs in the 1920s, and he saw residential schools as a way to “Kill the Indian in the Child.” The curriculum and atmosphere of the schools was designed to strip Indigenous kids of their identity and roots. In addition to the cultural death that happened in these schools, thousands of children lost their lives as well.

Duncan Campbell Scott was also a poet and a writer. Find a poem he wrote which tells you a bit more about his thoughts on assimilation, and digging up the roots of the First Nations peoples.
13) The Sixties Scoop, and Other Ways to Not Blend In

Residential schools were not the only way that the Canadian government removed children from their homes, cultures, and communities. In the 1960s, many children were removed from their homes by child-welfare workers and placed into foster care.

How does knowing this help us understand the identity crisis faced by many Indigenous people, who grew up cut-off from their culture? Find a poem that talks about the Sixties Scoop, or being taken away from family and roots.

14) No Reservation: Indigenous Gender and Sexuality (2-Spirited People)

First Nations people have a much broader definition of masculinity and femininity than the traditionally Western worldview. 2-Spirited people are seen as holding an important cultural role.

Gender identity and sexual identity is a huge part of self-knowledge. Find a poem which engages with an Indigenous conception of gender, sexuality, or 2-Spirited people.

15) Tricksters vs Martyrs: What Coyote Has to Say

The trickster is the voice of imagination, invention, rule-breaking and slyness. People who insist on being martyrs will tell you everything is serious, and creativity is something to slave over and perfect until it practically kills you. The trickster laughs at this. The trickster is represented in Indigenous stories as the coyote: wry and wise, and always scheming.

What might it look like to ground your creative identity in the ways of the trickster? Find a poem that handles play, sneakiness, and the way of the coyote.

16) Indigenous Leadership: Who is in Charge Here?

Western ideas of leadership highlight one leader who makes decisions on behalf of many people. Indigenous government is traditionally pluralistic, which means there may be many leaders. Leadership does not reflect hierarchy, or top-down decision making, but is a process of humble engagement with many voices. Leaders are sought out by people who want to follow them, and emerge authentically as needed.

In order to lead others, a person must be fully rooted in their own identity. Indigenous cultures celebrate highly autonomous individuals, who are also community-minded. Find a poem about leadership that reflects this view.

17) The Four Sacred Plants
Indigenous people make use of many plants, but there are four in particular which are used in ceremonies: Tobacco, Sage, Sweetgrass and Cedar. Tobacco is used to communicate with the spirit world, sage is used for cleansing and removing negativity, sweetgrass is the hair of mother earth, and cedar is for protection.

How might ceremonies help a person connect to and understand their roots? Find a poem that illustrates the importance of these plants and ceremonies to Indigenous people.

18) The Seventh Fire: Working Together

The Anishinaabe people have an ancient prophecy which talks about the four different colours of people (represented by the red, black, yellow, and white on the medicine wheel). The seventh fire is an invitation to work together to save each other, ourselves, and the planet.

Part of being rooted means being part of a community of people who are working together for a common goal. Find a poem about being rooted in the global community, and working together as members of different cultures to heal our relationships with each other and the planet.

19) Immigration: Becoming Native to Place

Becoming native to a place means to make it home. Many Indigenous writers and teachers comment on how the children of the colonizers don’t have both feet on the shore. One foot is still on the boat, meaning that we don’t take care of the land as if we expect to be here long. Robin Wall Kimmerer talks about the materialist culture and the way we treat the Earth as “a symptom of homelessness, a rootless past.”

Can Canadians, as a nation of immigrants, learn to live in Canada with both feet on the shore? Can we put down roots? Find a poem about making the Earth our home, and caring for her, as a way of becoming Indigenous to place.

20) Take Your Shoes Off: Learning from the Land

The land is a big part of identity in First Nations culture, and their connection to the living world is crucial. The lessons they take from nature are the mythic roots of native science: the early people learned to create fishnets by mimicking spider’s webs, from the whale what shape to make a canoe, and from beaver how to make an axe to chop down wood.
Being rooted, in an Indigenous way of knowing, means being connected to the land. Find a poem that talks about what we can learn from the land and animals, and from nature as our teacher.