Dear Sam, With Love: In Search of a Better Way to Live, Teach, and Parent on Stolen Lands

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Abstract

Framed as a letter to the author's daughter, this essay explores what it means to live, parent, and teach as a Settler Canadian on stolen Indigenous Land. Through personal reflections and Indigenous scholarship, the author considers how love, accountability, and relational learning can guide us toward decolonial and reconciliatory futures. This essay invites readers into the ongoing work of (un)learning and imagining more just and joyful ways of being in relation.

Dear Sam

November 15, 2022

Dear bébé,

You have been in our life for about 16 months now, excluding the whole 9 months you were kicking, turning, and burping in my belly. October 18, 2020, was the day that I found out I was going to be a mom, your mom. Since then, you have changed our world, our lives, our identities. You have made us selfless, loving, kind. I am a mother because of you, and I thank you for this. As I am looking at you, admiring your eyes and witnessing your smile, I know that I was meant to be your mom, and you were meant to be my daughter. Your eyes are filled with gentleness. Passion. Calmness. You have this thirst to learn. To be curious. To be adventurous. The gift of hearing your first words (it was mama, even if daddy will say it was papa), your first steps, and hopefully all of your "firsts" is such an honor.

I am not sure what this letter will lead to nor how or if it will end; I only know that it must be written and that I am afraid to write it. As Chambers (1994) so beautifully wrote, "Writing will be a kind of healing and I am on the road to healing. Writing will be a tool, a spiritual tool, a political tool with which I will clear my path" (p. 23). This letter is written for my daughter, Sam. However, the writing itself is rather a kind of quest, in search of a better way to live. In search of a better way to live in a "multiplicity of subjectivities that cannot be captured by any one single identity" (p. 25). In search of a better way to live as a partner, teacher, daughter, sister, auntie, learner, and a newly becoming mother—to become a mother is a transformation of self. As Grumet (1988) shared with us more than 30 years ago:

> The child is mine. The child is me. The woman who bears a child first experiences its existence through the transformations of time and space in her own body… The pressure of labour and the wrenching expulsion of the infant (the term "delivery" must have been created by those who receive the child, not those who release it) physically recapitulate the terrors of coming apart, of losing a part of oneself. The symbiosis continues. (p. 10)

This child, whose body is now separate from mine, somehow is still me. Writing this letter to my daughter Sam is also writing this letter to me, from me, in search of a better way to *live*.

In the following pages, I weave together the wisdom of scholars whose work has been and continues to be instrumental in my unlearning journey—navigating the complexities of my many roles and, as the call of this issue highlights, the messiness of simply being human. This letter acts as an invitation to other parents, sisters, aunties, teachers, scholars, and students alike, to join me as I navigate spaces between mothering, teaching and being in relation.

> *Sam, you were born on the stolen, unceded, and unsurrendered Land of the Anishinaabe peoples. An Elder from Kahnawá:ke Mohawk territory once told me that we should always know where the closest First Nations, Métis, or Inuit communities are from where we ground ourselves. Hence, Sam, the closest community from the place you were born is Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation. It is situated near the confluence of the Désert and Gatineau Rivers, and borders south-west on the Town of Maniwaki in the Outaouais region of what is known as the province of Québec.*[1]

Territorial acknowledgements are a longstanding practice among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. They are grounded in the recognition of each other's clans, languages, and connection to the Land (Zinga & Styres, 2011). According to many Indigenous scholars, these acknowledgements serve as both political and cultural acts that fundamentally position Land as the cornerstone of Indigenous knowledge systems (Alfred, 1999; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Snelgrove et al., 2014; Wilkes et al., 2017). As Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) stated:

> Like governance, leadership, and every other aspect of reciprocated life, education comes from the roots up. It comes from being enveloped by Land. An individual's intimate relationship with the spiritual and physical elements of creation is at the centre of a learning journey that is life-long. (p. 9)

The profound connections between Indigenous peoples and the Land embody extraordinary power and immense responsibility. These connections encompass the maintenance of balance, respect for the agency of all elements of place, and stewardship of sacred sites.

Land acknowledgements have become increasingly common across Canada, particularly in governmental and institutional contexts. While they aim to raise awareness among non-Indigenous peoples about the ongoing realities of colonization and displacement, they should also serve to honor the strength, resistance, and resilience of Indigenous communities. However, this practice often leads to ritualistic gestures that echo like a eulogy (Dei et al., 2022). As Dei et al. (2022) note, "Indigenous nations that still live and thrive on their Lands are relegated to a 'traditional' past, and it is implied that they willingly shared/gave their Lands to the white settlers who are the 'modern-day' inhabitants of said Land" (p. 3). This pervasive ritual serves to rid Settlers of the intergenerational guilt associated with colonization. The Eurocentric framing of Land acknowledgements reinforces the construction of the Canadian nation-state identity, often supported by curricular myths of multiculturalism, peacekeeping, socially progressive politics, and hard-earned prosperity (Davis et al., 2017). This act exemplifies what Tuck (a Unangax̂ scholar) and Yang (a Settler scholar) describe as a "settler move to innocence" (2012, p. 22). This

phenomenon illustrates how Settlers, whether consciously or unconsciously, may seek to distance themselves from the realities of their complicity in ongoing colonial structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

While there are legitimate criticisms, I believe that for some, Land acknowledgements serve as a vital opportunity for self-reflection. When there are Land acknowledgements at the faculty where I study, I take this time to think through my complicities, responsibilities, and implications for the ongoing colonialism of this Land and its peoples. I also take this opportunity to express my gratitude for the relations I have with Indigenous friends, teachers, and writers. I am so fortunate to learn alongside their teachings, stories, and wisdom.

> *Sam, we are Settler Canadians.*[2] *We are uninvited guests on Mikinaakominis, Turtle Island. Our lineage traces back to a family of predominantly French, Italian, German, and Irish ancestry. They arrived in the northeastern coast of what is now known as Canada, moving west and north, eventually arriving, at different times and in various locations, on Anishinaabeg, Eeyou Cree, Mi'gmaq, and Haudenosaunee homelands along the St. Lawrence River. We recognize ourselves as outsiders, living on this Land occupied by Indigenous peoples, yet we often claim it as our own. We are part of a legacy of white Settlers; we, too, are white Settler colonialists. As I write this letter to you, I am making a promise—one for myself, for you, and for the generations to come—that I will continue to unlearn the inherited stories of our ancestors and the stories they left behind.*

The words we use to introduce ourselves carry significant weight. As a child traveling with my parents, I would proudly declare, "I am Canadian," blissfully ignoring what that identity entailed. As I am growing up and becoming interested in learning about this "Canadianness," I am finding that it is a notoriously hard-to-pin-down concept that defies clear definition. Reminiscing about those adventures with my family and my youthful affirmations of national pride, I am compelled to consider how I want my daughter to understand her identity as a Canadian. Today, when I hear others identify themselves as being Canadian, I experience a troubling mix of guilt, disappointment, and a fraction of pride. This pride, explained by Anishinaabe scholar from Couchiching First Nation Professor Aaron Mills (Waabishki Ma'iingan, Baatwetang) (2017), is intricately woven into a carefully constructed narrative about our nation and what this membership signifies. This grand narrative, with its imposing settler colonial parade, obscures the uncomfortable truths about how many of us have come to identify as Canadians. So-called Canadians proud to belong to a nation, a nation that continues to "violently displace others for its own wants and desires, a state that breaks treaties and uses police and starvation to clear the land" (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 1). To this day, many Canadians remain not only unaware of their roles as agents and beneficiaries of colonialism but also unwilling to confront their personal connections to this ongoing legacy. This includes the entangled forces of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and state power that continue to uphold colonial structures (Coulthard, 2014). As Bishop (2015) asserts, "ignorance is part of the oppression" (p. 82).

In taking up the words of these scholars, I find myself wondering how I want Sam to approach the questions she will inevitably encounter: How should she respond when asked about her origins or the Land she inhabits? Can one feel pride—or perhaps honor—for the place we call home after learning the stories of our ancestors and the history of what came to be Canada? Watching my daughter take her first steps, utter her first words, and begin to trust others, I am struck by the profound responsibility I bear

to guide her on this journey of understanding her identity as a Settler Canadian born on stolen Indigenous Lands. At the same time, as a teacher, I have a responsibility to invite students to co-create spaces where we critically reflect on how we introduce ourselves—and, more importantly, on what our identities truly entail and implicate.

Kwey, Aani, Boozhoo, Welliegsitpu'g, Hi, Bonjour. My name is Melissa. I identify as a Francophone Settler Canadian, a label I embrace not only to introduce myself but also to engage in unlearning the history of the place I now call home. By identifying as a Settler Canadian, I aim to denaturalize and politicize the presence of non-Indigenous peoples, including myself, on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Lands. The Hul'qumi'num[3] term for Settler, *hwulunitum*, translates to "the hungry people" (Flowers, 2015, p. 24). For hwuhwilmuhw Coast Salish scholar Flowers (2015), hwulunitum reflects both the Settlers' disconnection from the Land and their insatiable greed for resources, Land, and wealth. Accordingly, the term Settler should serve to "disrupt the comfort of non-Indigenous people by bringing ongoing colonial power relations into their consciousness" (p. 33). By confronting my complicity in my roles as both mother and teacher, I seek to create opportunities for critical dialogue, reflection, and introspection. In my elementary classroom, I introduce myself in this way—to provoke a reaction, spark curiosity, and gently guide others toward becoming familiar with the language and with the layered stories embedded in each identity.

> *Sam, we must resist becoming like other zombie Settlers—numb to the ongoing impacts of colonialism—and confront the reality that our relationship with Indigenous peoples has never been predominantly peaceful or reconciliatory. As Dr. Dwayne Donald, descendent of the Amiskwaciwiyiniwak (Beaver Hills people) and the Papaschase Cree, reminds us, colonialism is an extended practice of denied relationship. Repairing these relationships begins with a commitment to learning the truth, so that we might take meaningful steps toward renewal. It is our obligation to learn about the true stories. The pieces that make up our life story. These pieces are not unconnected but neither do they easily interlock. It is the connection between the pieces—not the pieces themselves—that is the real story, the story that needs to be voiced. But it is the story that remains defiantly silent (Chambers, 1994).*
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> *Indigenous nations continue to face the erosion of their sovereignty, as control over their Lands is stripped away. They navigate policies that entrench economic underdevelopment, grapple with poverty, mass surveillance, and even military confrontation. All while striving for self-determination, for self-governance, for resurgence. The fight for the revitalization of language and culture remains deeply urgent.*
>
> *Together, we will learn about the broken treaties, the unresolved Land claims, and the ongoing struggles over traditional territories and resource rights.*
>
> *At the heart of these struggles lies a haunting logic: that Indigenous Peoples are to be monitored, managed, and marginalized. But my hope is that you will stand beside me, that we will raise our voices together against the persistent racism and violence that echoes through this Land. From the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIW), to systemic discrimination within social services and the education system, to police brutality.*
>
> *Because for Indigenous Peoples, colonialism is not a chapter in history books: it is a present and daily reality.*

In *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Regan (2010) urges Settler Canadians to relinquish the myth of ourselves as peacemakers and confront the destructive legacy that has historically marginalized Indigenous peoples. As Regan (2010) learns to listen to the stories of Residential School Survivors,[4] she describes how she engaged with these stories through an ethical act of bearing witness. While she reflects on the burden these stories can present, she understands that they are often perceived as gifts we struggle to accept. She suggests, "Perhaps we do not recognize it as a gift because it feels like a burden, like a heavy responsibility that we don't quite know how to carry, and we are afraid that we will do so poorly" (p. 18). Regan's (2010) insights compel me to ask, how can we learn to listen with humility and vulnerability to the narratives of dispossession, racism, and oppression still being lived and told to this present day? How might we cultivate mindfulness in our relationships with both people and the more-than-human world?

According to Davis et al. (2017),

> Settlers' anti-colonial learning, and unlearning, does not simply precede action; it occurs through action, through meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples and with other engaged settlers, and through experimentations with activism of various sorts. The Nehiyawak Cree refer to this relational and iterative process as Kisahkiwewin: love in action. (p. 394)

As these stories are told and shared, Regan (2010) and Davis et al. (2017) suggest grasping the weight of historical and contemporary injustices and, in turn, recognizing their implications for our relationships with these stories and alongside Indigenous communities. It is this concept of *Kisahkiwewin*—love in action—that will guide this decolonizing journey as interconnected beings.

In September 2023, I had the privilege of being invited into a sharing circle to honor the stories of Residential School Survivors. During this gathering, a Survivor invited us to reflect on the notion of safety in relation to the stories we were told. Safety, for me, evokes thoughts of home and my daughter. Each time I drop her off at daycare and kiss her forehead, I find tranquility in knowing that I will be able to hug her and bring her to the playground later that day. Yet, the more I contemplate safety, the more I become aware of its ties to privilege. Moving back and forth with Regan's (2010) teachings, I see the importance of how to engage with these stories of dispossession, colonialism, and violence, to see them as gifts that I accept with Kisahkiwewin.

In my classroom as a teacher, I try to hold space for the tensions and responsibilities that come with hearing these stories. I have learned that teaching about Residential Schools, colonial violence, and Indigenous resistance cannot be done from a place of abstraction. It must be grounded in Kisahkiwewin, love, relationships, and a willingness to be transformed by what we learn together. I try to foster a learning environment where my students understand that truth-telling is not only about uncovering facts; it is also about engaging ethically with those truths. As such, we read poetry by Indigenous youth, study testimonies from Survivors, and discuss why these stories matter—not only to foster accountability but also to hold space for the courage and brilliance of Indigenous resistance. As a Settler teacher I ask, how can I prepare my students not just to "know" about colonialism, but to love differently, to respond differently, and to live differently? How do I move from theoretical questions to pedagogical imperatives?

As Hunt (2016) asserts, "Decolonization requires a transformation in our relationships," not only with Indigenous peoples but also with these systems, institutions, and ourselves.

> *As I will likely remind you throughout your life, one cannot build a bridge by beginning at its center; rather, one must establish unshakable foundations on both shores before reaching toward the middle. Only when these foundations stand resilient and true can the structure invite others to walk across it.*
>
> *Yet, I continue to contemplate the delicate architecture of this collective bridge-building. The blueprint of its design and the essence of its function must emerge from Indigenous wisdom and direction. We will stand as companions in this path toward authentic Settler allyship. These relationships are to be nurtured, honored, and strengthened through time. Allyship exists not as a static identity to claim, but as a dynamic journey of action. It should stand as a sacred responsibility that unfolds through perpetual commitment. Our allyship manifests through the patient rhythm of consistent action and profound reflection.*[5]
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> *Once you are a bit older, I promise to introduce you to my cherished friends and mentors from Listuguj First Nation. Though the pandemic has created a physical distance between us and this sacred place, the bonds I share with these brilliant matriarchs remain deeply rooted in my heart. These relationships reflect the kind of connections I am committed to building. Where we learn from each other, honor cultural wisdom, and create bonds that span across generations.*

In *On Being Here to Stay* (2014), Michael Asch retells the story of Canada by centering the relationship between First Nations and Settlers. He argues that Canada, to this day, lacks a legal foundation for its sovereignty, and that there is no justification in law for why this Land should be governed by the Canadian state. Asch challenges us to consider what—beyond sheer numbers and political power—legitimizes Canada's claim to sovereignty and jurisdiction over this territory. In light of this, and as we reflect on Epp's (2008) provocative question, "How do we solve the Settler problem?" we must move beyond the discomfort and fear that too often paralyze meaningful efforts toward truth and then, reconciliation. This fear manifests in several forms: fear that acknowledging Indigenous peoples as *actual* peoples requires recognizing their existence since time immemorial and that the Land was not free for colonizers' taking (Mills, 2017); fear of losing privileges within colonial hierarchies; and fear that acknowledging past injustices might lead to retribution or forceful reclamation of unresolved grievances (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015).

This statement from Flowers (2015)—"You will never have my forgiveness as long as land dispossession, domination, and violence are present in the lives of Indigenous people" (p. 47)—highlights the fundamental barrier to reconciliation. The defensive emotional reactions this statement often triggers among Settlers impedes constructive dialogue about the complex relationships between Indigenous and Settler communities, further entrenching the disconnection that characterizes our current social reality. Until we can move beyond these reactive responses and genuinely address the ongoing injustices, meaningful progress toward healing these relationships remains elusive.

The reality, as Mills (2017) notes, is that "although we are distinct, unique peoples, we are not and have never been autonomous peoples … we're always-already in relationship" (p. 210). Both sides are here to stay, making it essential to confront and resolve underlying tensions. As Elder Fred emphasized, "we share space in a common land" (p. 210), necessitating coexistence that embraces our differences

while acknowledging shared history. This coexistence must be grounded in Indigenous governance through mutual aid, which Mills (2017) describes as "the sharing of our gifts to meet each other's needs" (p. 233). Mutual aid acknowledges our interdependence and the need for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to support and embrace one another through differences. It requires understanding our complex, shifting responsibilities as we "move through each four hills of life" (p. 236). Likewise, achieving harmony in this context means embracing a logic that may contradict Canadian ways of knowing and being. Here, harmony means "the grounded state of interdependent selves engaged with each other in personal practices of mutual aid" (Mills, 2017, p. 236). Living in right relation means fostering this harmony in our interactions.

By moving beyond Settler colonial fear, we create opportunities for respectful relationships that honor Indigenous knowledge of living in harmony with the Land—knowledge developed over generations of stewardship. Settler approaches to Land often reflect short-sighted, exploitative views that fundamentally conflict with Indigenous ways of knowing, perpetuating what Tuck & Yang (2012) call a "settler future" (p. 35). Continuing this extractive relationship with Land threatens our collective existence, especially when climate action failure stands as one of colonialism's most pressing consequences. Ironically, the most educated countries, including Canada, rank among the worst contributors to climate change (UNESCO, 2022).

As UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures* acknowledges (2022), "Indigenous women own knowledge that contributes to the mitigation and adaptation to climate change … but their contributions are often ignored" (p. 33). This pattern persists as Settlers frequently control decisions about Land that Indigenous peoples have stewarded since time immemorial. Okanagan author Jeanette Armstrong challenges non-Indigenous peoples to critically examine the "imperial garden we have cultivated" (as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 203). This reflection requires genuine listening and learning about the Land with and from Indigenous peoples. Simpson (2014) defines this approach as true education, as it emerges from being "enveloped by Land," a relationship central to Indigenous knowledge systems. Through this relationship with Land, Indigenous sovereignty can move from the margins to the center and become a powerful source of resurgence.

> *Sam, Indigenous peoples are not only survivors of colonization and ongoing colonialism—they are visionaries, knowledge keepers, artists, and fierce protectors of the Land. Their stories are not confined to pain; they pulse with brilliance, courage, and joy. We will learn to listen with reverence, to dance when invited, to sing in solidarity, and to create in relation. We will honor not only the grief, but the fire—the love, the leadership, the laughter, and the liberation that continues to rise, unshaken.*

This transformation of our systems and relationships demands more than merely refusing "to collaborate in maintaining injustice" (Irlbacher-Fox, 2014, p. 156); it calls for the deliberate, ongoing work of valuing Indigenous worldviews and *walking alongside* Indigenous peoples in their efforts of resurgence and revitalization. Resurgence is not only about resistance—it is about renewal. It is not a return to a past, but the active and forward-facing revitalization of Indigenous lifeways, Lands, and governance systems, deeply rooted in relationships, Land, and spiritual consciousness (in conversation with McGuire-Adams).

It is all about the "everyday acts of resurgence," as they represent continuity, care, and most importantly, the refusal to disappear (Corntassel, 2012). We must commit ourselves to a future where, as Mills (2017) envisions, Indigenous peoples live freely within treaty confederacies that honor their own constitutional orders. In this way, resurgence is not something for Settlers to "support" from the sidelines, but something that fundamentally reorients our relationships, responsibilities, and ways of living.

Kanien'kehá:ka professor Taiaiake Alfred (2005) describes resurgence as a vital and spiritual reconnection between individuals and their communities through both material and ceremonial acts. This resurgence insists that we reject colonial control and redefine what is socially and spiritually valuable. "Without our spiritual consciousness," Alfred (2009) writes, "we have no identity, no real values, and no solid foundation upon which to build a decolonized reality" (p. 180). This is not a metaphorical revolution—it is one that speaks to this regeneration. As Simpson (2014) affirms, this spiritual and political transformation breathes life back into relationships and practices that were deliberately attacked by colonial violence (with this refusal to forget).

Indigenous resurgence scholars do not merely invite Settlers to listen; call on us to reimagine the very terms of sovereignty, knowledge, and relationality. As Simpson (2011) teaches through *biskaabiiyang*, decolonization begins not only in policy or protest but in the full recalibration of mind, body, and heart; it is a return to Indigenous processes and ceremonial relationships. Similarly, Simpson and Klein (2017) describe resurgence as "dancing the world into being," asserting it as a creative, embodied act of nationhood, kinship, and care. This lens moves us beyond the understanding that resistance must always be heavy; it is also joyful, artful, musical, and fiercely loving. In addition, Dene-Canadian scholar Coulthard (2014) further reminds us that Indigenous freedom cannot be located in state recognition or reconciliation alone. He writes that resurgence "seeks to practice decolonial, gender-emancipatory, and economically nonexploitative alternative structures of law and sovereign authority" (p. 179). In other words, it is not simply what Settler governments *allow*—it is what Indigenous peoples *build*, all of it being grounded in self-determination.

Yet, there is an urgency to begin this work with care and Kisahkiwewin (love in action). As Tuck (2009) argues, we must shift away from damage-centered narratives that reduce Indigenous communities to sites of suffering and victimization. Instead, Tuck (2009) offers "desire-based frameworks" that affirm Indigenous presence, creativity, futurity, and agency. These frameworks invite us to focus not only on what has been lost, but on what is possible—and already alive. Anishinaabe scholar McGuire-Adams (McGuire-Adams & Giles, 2018) echoes this shift by describing resurgence through Indigenous *dibaajimowinan* (stories) embedded in the everyday: through physical activity such as running, ceremony, language, and kinship. These acts nourish a resurgent Indigenous body–mind–spirit, which is necessarily political and embodied and enveloped in Land and place. When we center Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and teaching—as Anishinaabe scholar Styres (2017) puts it, when we recognize the Land as pedagogy—we begin to co-create an ethical future that honors the wisdom of those who have stewarded this Land since time immemorial.

As a teacher reflecting with and from the words of these Indigenous scholars, I wonder how to take up these desire-based frameworks in my classroom. How do I go beyond token inclusion to genuine transformation in how we teach and learn? As Mi'kmaw professor from Potlotek First Nation Dr. Marie Battiste (2013) asserts, "educational institutions must acknowledge the existence of multiple knowledge systems and find room to integrate Indigenous knowledge into their policies, programs, and practices" (p. 102). This begins by genuinely inviting Indigenous peoples to co-create spaces for dialogue—not as consultants but as collaborators with inherent authority. Styres (2017) calls us to embrace Land as pedagogy—where learning is not just about place, but about relational accountability. "Land is not the backdrop for learning," Styres (2017) reminds us, "it is the teacher" (p. 36). This perspective shifts education from content-based to connection, or from instruction to interrelation.

The concept of ethical relationality in curriculum theory, developed by Papaschase Cree scholar Dwayne Donald, further supports this shift. Ethical relationality, as Donald (2012) defines, is "an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other" (p. 43). Rather than being a theoretical stance, it stands as a pedagogical invitation. Donald (2009) reminds us that decolonizing education means a willingness to "confront the fort walls of knowledge and identity that block us from recognizing how deeply we are interconnected" (p. 6). Providing a decolonial reframing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, ethical relationality places differing philosophies and worldviews in productive tension, creating possibilities for meaningful dialogue about shared educational interests and initiatives (Donald, 2012).

> *Baby, I promise to continue reading to you bedtime stories written by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis authors—tales rich with wonder, wisdom, and the rhythms of the Land.*
> *You will learn, with love, from my Mi'gmaq sisters about the medicines blooming in our own backyard, and why the scent of sage sometimes lingers in the corners of our home.*
>
> *I promise we will come to know the stories of the Land we call home—its treaties, its truths, its struggles for Land and water.*
> *We will walk gently into ceremonies, powwows, and sharing circles, when invited, our hearts open to listen and to learn.*
> *And there, hand in hand, or with you on my shoulders, we will make new friends.*
>
> *When we travel, I promise to teach you whose Land we are standing on, to honor its stories, past and present.*
> *We will visit the communities across this country, learning the histories I was never taught in school, and learning to walk with love, following the protocols of each place.*
>
> *I promise to surround you with Indigenous beauty—*
> *to bring you to art exhibitions where colors and textures and voices sing the songs of generations,*
> *to fill our home with the sounds of Indigenous musicians,*
> *and to make our Friday movie nights a celebration of Indigenous filmmakers and their stories.*
>
> *We will cook together too—I'll show you how to make* lusqniqn*, just the way Auntie Naomi taught me.*

As I drive you to your future school, our car will be filled with the voices of Indigenous podcasters, storytellers, and thinkers.

I promise to stand beside you at gatherings and rallies that speak truth to power as we raise our voices for justice,
and to walk gently together as we learn—and unlearn—how to care for this Land.

And most importantly,
I promise this list will never be finished.
As we grow, we will keep adding to it—together.
Forever learning, forever listening, forever loving.

In this essay, I have interwoven my autobiographical reflections with the wisdom of others to interrogate what it means to be a Canadian Settler on stolen Indigenous lands. I delved into how I saw my responsibilities tied to this identity and our obligations to addressing historical and contemporary injustices. Although this letter reaches a momentary pause, it will remain unfinished. Its gaps will continue to echo the complexity of the questions it seeks to answer. I know I still have so much more to learn—so many writings to read, voices to listen to, stories to sit with, and relationships to nurture. I am just beginning to grasp the depth and beauty of what Indigenous scholars, artists, and knowledge keepers are generously offering. And I know that this learning will not come from texts alone; it will come from being in relation with and living alongside others.

As a mother, I imagine my role as a co-learner. I am looking forward to walking beside my daughter as we ask difficult questions, make mistakes, and practice doing better. As a teacher, my responsibility is one of deep care: to create spaces of ethical engagement, to center Indigenous knowledge without appropriation, and to hold space for joy, discomfort, and transformation.

It is important to show the starting point, to make visible the footprint of what my work is to become—as I wrestle with the weight of being a Settler mother, teacher, and curriculum scholar on Lands that are not mine. What does it mean to carry this identity, to inherit both its privileges and its responsibilities? How do we take responsibility for the ongoing impacts of colonization and build genuine and accountable relationships with Indigenous communities and the Land? This essay, like the letter, resists closure. It demands instead a continual asking of questions and a willingness to be changed—as we move through the tangled and unfinished story of this shared existence.

Notes

1. Information on Kitigàn Zibi in: https://www.gvhs.ca/digital/lowdown/history-display.php?search=&row=12&kind=like and http://www.ubcpress.ca/resistance-and-recognition-at-kitigan-zibi

2. I have chosen to use the term "Settler Canadian," with "Settler" capitalized; this is based on the work of Settler scholars such as Battell Lowman & Barker (2015). They understand that the term "Settler" draws attention to the collective identity of people who arrived and stayed on the lands of Indigenous peoples.

3. Hul'qumi'num is a language of various First Nations people of the British Columbia coast.

4. The Canadian Residential School system was jointly established by the federal government and various churches. Its aim was to educate and forcibly assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream society "for their own good" (Regan, 2010). Many children were removed from their families, often violently, by Indian agents or police, to completely erase their connection to their heritage and Land (Battiste, 2013; Miller, 2017; Regan, 2010). The process of assimilation involved Indigenous children being forbidden to speak their language or practice their cultural and spiritual traditions, or punished for doing so. They experienced devastating cultural, psychological, and emotional harms and traumatic abuses. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) found at least 4,130 confirmed names (and still counting today) of children who died at these schools. This has resulted in an intergenerational history of dispossession, violence, abuse, and racism—and a fundamental denial of the human dignity and rights of Indigenous peoples.

   At the time, Indigenous peoples were also facing significant losses: territory and resources, catastrophic disease, forced dislocation, and the imposition of foreign governance structures (Napoleon & Friedland, 2016, p. 6). The government had clear intentions: to control Indigenous lives. They attempted to "civilize" Indigenous peoples while cutting their ties to traditional Lands. The Land—which provides physical and spiritual strength for Indigenous peoples (Alfred, 2005). Additionally, the government repeatedly violated Treaty agreements with Indigenous Nations (Dickason, 2009; Saul, 2009; King, 2012). While I acknowledge that I have only scratched the surface of this history, Tuck and Yang's (2012) assertion that "Indigenous peoples must be erased, must be made into ghosts" (p. 6) strikes a chord within me. As Tuck and Yang (2012) explain further, the complete erasure or assimilation of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples would render the Land "empty," allowing it to be appropriated by white Settlers without resistance.

5. Ideas and concepts were influenced by many readings, including McGuire-Adams (2021), Regan (2010), Steinman (2020), and Smith et al. (2015).

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