

A letter to settler students engaging with Indigenous scholars and methods

*It is with deep reverence that I raise my hands to the stewards of the Coast Salish territories, Səlílwətał (Tseil-Waututh), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and xʷməθkwəyəm (Musqueam) Nations in K'emk'emeláy ("Vancouver").*

Dear (white) settler graduate students,

As a former graduate student at SFU, I have observed how settler colonial dominance manifests in a multitude of insidious ways within institutions of higher learning. As white settlers and prospective scholars living in the “post-” pandemic era, this deep-rooted colonial structural supremacy presents a paradox in engaging with Indigenous scholarship. On the one hand, our ‘white saviour complex’ (Bhakti, 2015), and our insatiable colonial hunger to excavate answers to our burning questions, may lead to the intention of wanting to do research with, or about, Indigenous communities without considering if we *should*. And on the other hand, it is increasingly urgent to embrace, listen to, and take up Indigenous ways of knowing-being in the form of stories, teachings, and theories if/when they are offered, as potential pathways to becoming more whole humans/scholars. In other words, settler relationships with Indigenous folks are not easy; they take an emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual discipline and humility not often discussed in educational spaces.

Despite this, there are ways for settler scholars in academic institutions to address, rather than reproduce, the appropriation of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and Knowledge Systems. In this essay I share how I came to be *taught by*, rather than solely *learn from* (Parent & Kerr, 2016) Indigenous teachers. In what follows, I offer three key ‘listenings’ I gathered in the course of my master’s research, in order to encourage fellow (white) settler students to intentionally consider the gravity of responsibility in engaging with Indigenous stories, theories, and Knowledges.

I am a white queer settler of Jewish Ashkenazi (Ukraine and Belarus) and Dutch ancestry, who grew up in Algonquin, Anishinaabe territories, colonially known as “Ottawa, Ontario.” In 2018, I came to Səlílwətał (Tseil-Waututh), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and xʷməθkwəyəm (Musqueam) homelands in K'emk'emeláy (“Vancouver”) to pursue a Masters in Equity Studies in Education at SFU. My research interests were focused on critical pedagogies for decolonization, anti-racism, trans-inclusion, and disability justice. I completed my MA in 2023 and since then continue to dedicate my work in the non-profit sector and in community organizing to building solidarities with Indigenous peoples from these lands and abroad, in Palestine.

### **Listening #1: Reciprocal relationship requires ongoing consent**

Without the footing of Indigenous mentorship for settler learning, there is no room for reciprocal relationships to unfold (Archibald, 2008; Parent & Kerr, 2016). As it should be with the land, an ongoing, informed consent-based process is essential in building respect with Indigenous peoples. In reflecting back to my educational pursuits, it was always my intention in coming to so-called “Vancouver” in 2018 to work with and be *taught by* Indigenous peoples. Because a relationship was fostered with my teacher, Dr. Amy Parent / *Noxs Ts'aawit* (Mother of the Raven Warrior Chief named *Ts'awit*; Nisga'a and settler ancestry), and Knowledge Holder, Dr. Kim van der Woerd (Namgis), two years prior to the commencement of my ethnographic study, there was a foundation of trust to build upon. What I came to understand over time is that there is nothing wrong with expressing interest in these relationships, but

settlers must practice failing, learning to accept “no,” not right now, or ever, while dually enacting consent with Indigenous communities (Recollet, 2021).

Establishing reciprocal relationships is feasible if settlers take the time to ask, listen, and respond to Indigenous community needs with the resources and support they require. Practically speaking, this relationship building entailed showing up to events (if/when invited) to help with mundane tasks that included everything from carrying event equipment, preparing medicine bundles, to ordering culturally appropriate foods. It is the act of continuing to show interest, show *up*, being there to help out in any way that is needed, and allowing opportunities for mutual exchange to organically unfold. It is in this way that settlers can begin to foster whole-hearted relationships with Indigenous communities. Even so, we must let go of control and take great care when entering into connection with Indigenous peoples and the lands we occupy.

### **Listening #2: Perfectionism is an impediment to (un)learning**

Receiving honest feedback from Indigenous teachers is contingent on the development of trust over time. At the crux of the practice of listening is working to actively unlearn perfectionism as a tool of white supremacy (Okun, 2021). My previous academic and professional learnings did not safeguard me from engaging in moves to sustain my white settler dominance, through instances of reactivity, tokenization (i.e., the notion that one or few Indigenous people represent all Indigenous peoples), pan-Indigenizing (i.e., presentation of Indigenous peoples as a monolith), and appropriating (i.e., inappropriate or unacknowledged adoption of one's culture by another culture or identity) Indigenous Knowledges.

One significant moment of feedback I received was from Dr. Van der Woerd about a settler strategy of mine to interrupt and listen only to respond. By intellectualizing my emotions, my reaction was full of what Gilio-Whitaker (2018) terms ‘settler fragility,’ or more aptly, moves to power. This realization was a key moment in gaining a deeper awareness of my internalized superiority in relation to my understanding of Indigenous Knowledges. Ultimately, I had to own my behaviour and in response began opening settler participant circles with the teaching I had been offered to deepen my own learning, as well as fellow settler staff I worked with in a feminist non-profit organization in so-called “Vancouver.”

Finding a community of settler co-conspirators (Jones, 2015, as cited in Hackman, 2015) is essential to sharing our blunders, gaining comfort in vulnerability, and practicing failing together. Taking responsibility for our settler entitlement is work that cannot happen in isolation; however, it must start with interrogating one's own positionality. The practice of reflexivity is vital in documenting emerging feelings, pre-set expectations, and the everchanging relationality with Indigenous teachers. For radical shifts in settler learning to take place in academia and beyond, we must commit on a continuous basis to taking accountability for the perpetual harms done to Indigenous folks in our communities.

### **Listening #3: Unsettling settler identity is a wholistic practice**

Against the background and legacy of colonialism, we as white settlers flood our brains with misinformation and disconnect from our full humanity. While, as Dr. Kim van der Woerd puts it, “listening with a full heart” (listening to *listen*, not to respond) is a teaching in embracing ways of knowing-being that challenge colonial worldviews. The principles of Indigenous *wholism* (Archibald, 2008) troubled my research, disrupted my colonial mindset, and my sense of self.

In my unsettling journey, I was (and continue to be) confronted with deep-rooted shame with regards to my relationship to land and place. As I began to integrate Indigenous placenames, plant knowledge, and relational methods into my own psyche, the research started coming through in unexpected and affectual ways, such as in memory and metaphor, that spoke back to my Western Cartesian ideologies, separating mind from body and spirit. Theorizing on the land, and *with* the land, gave me a lens to (re)locate my ancestral stories in ways that continue to heal and transform.

In my reflections, I witnessed my own pattern of rationalizing my emotions, rather than feeling them. To be respectful of Indigenous relationships, it is our responsibility as settler researchers to push ourselves outside of our colonial comforts by interrogating our privileged worldview and the limitations of our binary Western thinking. When we engage our emotional bodies, we create more sustainable pathways towards movements of justice for Indigenous peoples, and ultimately us all.

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In detailing my process as a white settler student, I hope to have helped demystify and challenge the romanticization of working with, and doing research about, Indigenous peoples. Doing settler research is inherently contradictory as it attempts to work within reform systems as an avenue for confronting colonization, and simultaneously can offer sites of settler learning, and sources of Indigenous mentorship. To engage with Indigenous methodologies and teachers in *respectful, relevant, and reciprocal* ways (Archibald, 2008; Parent, 2014) requires a commitment to consent-based processes and wholistic practices that are at once imperfect and allow for a deeper connection to ourselves, others, and the land.

Thus, if you are contemplating doing research with, or about Indigenous peoples, the question to ask yourself is whether you are prepared to commit to a life-long, life-wide practice that has no road map, no compass, and necessitates complete transformations. I can personally attest to the unforeseen losses, grief, and life changes that accompany doing settler research, and in retrospect I wouldn't change it for the world. Despite concerted efforts to solely think my way through the unsettling process, there was no way around the discomfort—only through.

With gratitude and in solidarity,

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Read Dvorah Silverman's Master's thesis here: [The settler feminist problem: Reconciliation workshops in feminist non-profit organizations](#)

*Dvorah Silverman (any/all) is a queer anti-Zionist Jewish settler and uninvited guest living joyfully in diaspora on unceded and stolen Səlílwətał (Tseil-Waututh), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) homelands in K'emk'emeláy ("Vancouver"). Dvorah holds an M.A. in Curriculum & Instruction: Equity Studies in Education from Simon Fraser University, with a focus in critical pedagogies for decolonization, anti-racism, trans-inclusion, and disability justice. With over a decade of non-profit experience in anti-violence and equity-seeking organizations, Dvorah brings an anti-oppressive framework for education and a trauma-informed approach into all their projects. A passionate researcher and facilitator, their work, research, and life are guided by earth-based Jewish practices and Indigenous Knowledges shared by their teachers that offer ways to be in reciprocal relationship with all life.*

Recommended readings:

A: *Halfbreed*, by Maria Campbell (1973)

B: *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*, by Lee Maracle (1988)

C: *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, by Gord Hill (2010)

### References

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