

**Land and Language**

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**Abstract**

In tracing my ancestral roots back to both my maternal and paternal line, I was able to learn more about my heritage. In learning this, I feel more connected to who I am and how this has been influenced by where I originated from. For instance, the foods I eat, the holidays I celebrate, as well as my cultural practices are all influenced by my heritage. Till this day, we celebrate Christmas on Christmas Eve, as this is how it is done traditionally in the German culture. There are many other practices that are unique to my cultural background that influence both my actions and sense of self. Living in what is referred to as “Canada”; I am able to freely experience and connect to my heritage. However for Indigenous peoples this is not always as easy. Indigenous peoples have been living on the lands before the land was known as “Canada”. However, Indigenous relationships to their land and culture are continually disrupted by colonialist powers attempting to eradicate Indigenous peoples and their connections to their land (Monchalin, 2016). Furthermore, “Canada” is based on colonialism and the settlers taking of Indigenous lands. This understanding of “Canada” as settler society that speaks English and French excludes Indigenous peoples and thus reinforces efforts to erase Indigenous peoples.

### **Ancestral History**

In locating my ancestors, I found both sides of my family are immigrants to Canada. Before coming to Canada, my ancestors primarily spoke English, with my paternal line speaking English and German. My maternal line immigrated to Canada around the 1900’s from Kilkenny, Ireland to the Yukon, Canada in search of jobs. On my paternal line my family is from Germany but lived in Russia. They left Russia in the 1900’s to escape the rise of the Soviet Union. During this time, Russia was not a place many people wanted to be. Joseph Stalin was actively forcing starvation on the people so that goods could be exported out to increase trade and industrialization (Wirsz, Personal Communication, 2019). Many were also forced into labour camps, where working conditions were horrific. Furthermore, there were also ongoing efforts to break up German groups living in Russia. As a result, my paternal family came to Canada in search of a better life. This search for “a better life” in Canada was constructed on the basis of Canada being a place that offered individual’s greater opportunities for success, freedom, and overall wellbeing of one’s family. However, opportunities to establish a better life in Canada are not universal.

The idea of “a better life” is therefore constructed by false ideologies that all individuals have the same opportunities for a better life in Canada. While living in Canada, my grandparents have been able to preserve their German culture, language, and heritage. They have continued to teach me about my German heritage and thus I have been able to stay connected to my ancestral roots. While, I am grateful for being able to continually embrace my German heritage, it is also unsettling to know that Indigenous peoples do not have the same privileges that I do. My family is systemically privileged in Canada and do not face the risk of attempted eraser of our culture. Monchalin mentions how White people are seen as “superior” to Indigenous peoples and how colonialism attempts to eradicate the “inferior” Indigenous peoples (2016). Furthermore, Indigenous peoples also face inequalities within societal structures such as systemic racism that hold Indigenous people at a lower standard (Monchalin, 2016). As a result, Indigenous peoples face ongoing marginalization.

### **Languages of the Land**

Growing up and living in Canada my whole life, I was taught and under the assumption that English and French are the languages of the land. As a child, I remember going to Kawkawa Lake every summer and spending countless hours swimming and enjoying the water. Being young, I did not think much about where the origins of the name Kawkawa came from and rather looked at it as just a name. It was not until recently that I began to question the name Kawkawa. In researching the origins of Kawkawa, I found out that it is a Halq'emeylem word meaning “home of loons”, after two loons that lived here (Thom, 1995). Kawkawa lakes north shore also backs onto reserve number 16 (Thom, 1995). After all the memorable hours spent at Kawkawa Lake it is unfortunate that I just recently looked into the origins of the name. This shows how Indigenous names are often overlooked and how there is little recognition of Indigenous languages. Additionally, English and French are thought to be the languages of land. This is reinforced by the “dominant” culture that continues to reinforce English and French as Canada’s “official” languages. However, Indigenous languages have been around for over 10,000 years (Bige, Personal Communication, 2019). Living in Surrey, the land is part of the Kwantlen nation that includes the areas around the Fraser River (Hill-Tout, 1978). Kwantlen peoples are located here due to the

close proximity to the river (Hill-Tout, 1978). Within the Kwantlen nation the language is Halkomelem, which is a division of the Salish language (Hill-Tout, 1978). In Surrey, Kwantlen peoples speak the down river dialect, Hul'q'umi'num (Hill-Tout, 1978). This information on the language of the land we live on is not readily accessible. For instance, it was not until this class that I was made aware of the language of the land. As a result, this shows how the “dominant” languages are imposed on Canadian society and reject Indigenous languages. Furthermore, I saw a connection to Residential schools and how in these schools Indigenous children were not allowed to speak their own languages, but rather forced to speak English (Monchalin, 2016). In forcing children to speak English, it was meant to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture by stripping them of their Indigenous roots (Monchalin, 2016). Consequently, in not having respect, acknowledgement, or representation of Indigenous languages, this acts as another attempt at the eradication of Indigenous peoples and their language. This also disconnects the Indigenous language from the land. Smith (1999) addresses how history is about power and how those with power write histories. Furthermore, Indigenous peoples are excluded from their histories and their voices are not heard (Smith, 1999). As a result, the settlers have determined the language of the land and attempt to erase Indigenous languages. In fact, Hill-Tout (1978) mentions how Halkomelem language is on the decline as hardly any of the population speaks the language. We can conclude this decline is largely from colonial eradication efforts. Corntassel mentions how Indigenous peoples must continue tradition, language, culture, etc. to resist colonization (Corntassel, Personal Communication, 2019). In doing so, cultural resurgence can take place (Corntassel, Personal Communication, 2019).

### **Understandings and Connections to the Land**

Living on the unceded traditional lands of the Kwantlen, Musqueam, Katzie, Semiahmoo, Qayqayt, and Kwikwetlem peoples it is important to understand the continued hardships these nations face, as a result of ongoing colonization. Indigenous peoples have a strong relationship to the land; Anderson (2010) speaks of Indigenous people's connection to water and how it is a spirit that connects feelings and thoughts. Anderson (2010) also addresses how water is ceremonial and is used in naming ceremonies as well as in songs that are sung to thank the water. Additionally, water can be viewed as the

blood veins of mother earth (Anderson, 2010, pg.18). In learning about Indigenous connections to the land and water, it made me realize how my ancestors and I do not take the time to reflect on the significance of the land, by thanking it for all it gives us. This shows how my family follows Western ideologies that view land as something that needs to be used rather than respected. Additionally, when colonizers steal lands and attempt to erase Indigenous culture this results in a disconnection from the lands and their sense of self (Monchalin, 2016). Being disconnected from culture and land results in intergenerational trauma, such as when children were being taken to Residential Schools (Monchalin, 2016). It is important to constantly reflect on the hardships Indigenous peoples face and have faced to be more aware of the history of the land. For instance, Terra Nullius and the concept of empty land (Monchalin, 2016). Land was viewed as uninhabited if it was not being used effectively, such as for profit (Monchalin, 2016). It is this concept as well as the Doctrines of Discovery which were legal documents that gave the colonizers rights to take the lands from Indigenous peoples (Monchalin, 2016). Alternatively, colonizers ideas of land clashed with the ideas of Indigenous peoples who value, respect, and honor the land (Monchalin, 2016).

### **Jurisdiction over the Land**

In fact, the documents that employ concepts of “empty land” have not changed much. The First Nation Bulletin, written by Russell Diabo (2017) addresses this as well as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau Reconciliation promises to Indigenous peoples. Today, the supreme court of Canada still uses the Doctrines of Discovery when addressing territorial claims, even though challenges to this have been made such as with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Diabo, 2017). Furthermore, colonization has continued to deny Indigenous rights and jurisdiction to the lands (Diabo, 2017). Looking at the “nation to nation” reconciliation outlined by Trudeau, Diabo describes its two purposes. Firstly, it is continuation of assimilation that tries to get Indigenous peoples to opt out of the Indian act (Diabo, 2017). Secondly, it looks to get rid of land rights and existing sovereignty (Diabo, 2017). As a result, the “nation to nation” plan leaves no room for equal Indigenous power and jurisdiction (Diabo, 2017). According to Diabo,

action must be taken by Indigenous peoples otherwise the government will recolonize Indigenous communities through the “nation to nation” structure (2017).

### **European Understandings of the Land**

In learning about the land I live on and the implications it has for Indigenous peoples, such as with the continual struggle to have jurisdiction over the lands, I started to connect to my ancestral history. When my family arrived in Canada, they were farmers. They lived in Alberta and primarily farmed wheat. This wheat was grown on the land and would later be sold for profit. This is how my family made a living when they first came to Canada. In using the land to receive a profit, my family follows the idealist use of land determined by settlers, in which land that makes profit is not “empty”. Additionally, my family also had rights to this land and could use it how they wished. However, Indigenous peoples struggle to have the same rights. Colonialism continues to take Indigenous lands claiming them as their own and thus constantly redefining the decisions and status of Indigenous rights to the land.

### **Impacts of the Foster Care System and Connections to the Land**

When speaking to my maternal grandma about her experiences arriving in Canada from Ireland, she mentioned how the family struggled. My grandmother told me they came here with little to no money and struggled to keep food on the table. She then went on to tell me how she spent a few years in foster care as her parents were seen as unfit to raise her and her sister. In asking her about this experience, she said it was not great but at least she had her sister. Her relationship with her sister and being able to see her regularly helped my Grandma stay connected to her family and heritage. When leaving the foster care system, my Grandma was able to reconnect to her parents. I remember asking my Grandma if she feels like the foster care system affected her sense of identity; she said: “partially, but in knowing that I would see my parents again helped me hold onto who I was”. In hearing this story, it made me think of how Indigenous peoples are over represented in the foster care system (Kaspar, 2014). Kaspar (2014) states that Indigenous children in foster care makeup 30-50%. In this article, Kaspar looks specifically at the Métis population and the effects of foster care on these children (2014). Children in foster care are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, as well as other mental health issues (Kaspar,

2014). For Métis children in foster care, there is a lack of culturally relevant mental health care, as well as lack of community cohesion to their culture (Kaspar, 2014). As a result, Métis children's cultural spirituality and connectivity is disrupted by the foster care system (Kaspar, 2014). Additionally, parents of these children have no rights to determine the religious and cultural practices their children receive (Kaspar, 2014). On this note, Métis children are alienated from heritage, as well as traditional knowledge and beliefs that connect them to their communities (Kaspar, 2014). The removal of these children from their communities influences the likelihood of having mental health problems (Kaspar, 2014). The high rates of Indigenous peoples in foster care, relates to the systemic racism that devalues Indigenous culture, as well as enacts ongoing assimilation attempts of Indigenous peoples into "Canadian culture" (Kaspar, 2014). In learning about the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in foster care it is evident that societal structures oppress Indigenous peoples and this ties into the overrepresentation in foster care. However, in looking at this issue in more depth I noticed that is not only a systemic issue but a cultural issue. Indigenous peoples share a spiritual connection to their lands and language (Corntassel, Personal Communication, 2019). In being taken off the land and away from their families this spiritual and communal connection is disrupted (Corntassel, Personal Communication, 2019). As a result, Indigenous children in foster care lack integration to their heritage, as well as their community. Reflecting on this issue, my Grandma was able to stay connected to her ancestral roots by being in foster care with her sister as well as seeing her parents again. Additionally, she still had ties to her community. For Indigenous peoples this is not always the case, as foster care typically excludes Indigenous practices and traditions as well as takes the children off their lands (Kaspar, 2014). This shows the need for more Indigenous voices in the foster care system. In Ottawa, the control of Indigenous child welfare is being given to Indigenous governments to help reduce the amount of Indigenous children in foster care (Tasker, 2018). This is due to the current foster care system that fuels Indigenous children's displacement from their heritage. Being connected to your family, especially at a young age is crucial for understanding your culture and heritage. I cannot imagine not having my parents and grandparents in my life, who constantly teach me about my ancestral roots. Alfred and Corntassel (2005) address how "land is life- and [Indigenous] people must

reconnect with the terrain and geography of their Indigenous heritage if they are to comprehend the teachings and values of the ancestors” (4). Additionally, the foster care systems breaks the connection to the land and Indigenous peoples sense of self.

### **Importance of Knowing Who You Are**

It is important to know who you are and where you came from as this shapes who you are and creates a sense of self. I also think knowing who you are in the context of society is important. Being a White female, I am systemically privileged as the Canadian structures/systems hold White people at a high level (Monchalin, 2016). On this note, it is important to note how Indigenous peoples historically and presently face racism and discrimination by Canadian structures. In Alberta, toxic waste from oil production is being deposited into the river (Monchalin, 2016). This waste flows downstream into Indigenous reserve areas (Monchalin, 2016). Furthermore, this pollution of the water has resulted in serious health issues, such as Cancer of the bile ducts, which is typically rare (Monchalin, 2016). Currently, no changes have been made to the deposit of waste; rather the continued poisoning of Indigenous water sources continues (Monchalin, 2016). This shows how Indigenous peoples face environmental racism. I suspect that if White people were living on this area of land changes to the depositing of waste would be of priority to the government. As a result, I am constantly challenging everything around me, as I strive to go beyond the Eurocentric framework that dominates our society. I think it also important to be critical of the past, as Indigenous perspectives are left out, yet provide valuable contributions to what we know as “Canada” today. Furthermore, in knowing where you come from, you are more aware of who you are in the context of history, present day, and future.

### **Canada is Indigenous Land**

By taking action, with being more knowledgeable and critical of taken for granted assumptions on the lands such as the perception that Canada is settler land. I am able to see more perspectives and better understand the injustices Indigenous peoples face and how this is a result of ongoing colonialism. The land belongs to Indigenous peoples and they have never given it up, yet till this day they face the threat of having land stolen, such as with Wet’suwet’en. In knowing the history of my ancestors and how



connected I am to them. I can take action to ensure Indigenous peoples remain connected to their ancestors, by actively working toward promoting more acceptance of Indigenous culture, such as with more land acknowledgements. In regards, to foster care, Indigenous voices must be heard such as with the initiatives in Ottawa that made adoption of Indigenous children be decided upon by Indigenous peoples (Tasker, 2018). In learning about the land and languages of the land, one is better equipped to help take action to ensure Indigenous lands remain in their possession. I also believe we should strive to achieve a more just system of Indigenous self-determination. One that respects and promotes equality, as well as gives Indigenous peoples the rights to govern themselves and their lands how they choose.

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