

Western University

Scholarship@Western

2022 Cohort

Head and Heart Indigenous Research
Fellowship

2022

A Letter to My Great-Great-Grandfather

Morgan Mannella

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/headandheartprogram_2022

August 10th, 2022

Dear William George Solomon,

You are my great-great-grandfather. I am the great-granddaughter of your daughter, Mary Edna. I am the granddaughter of Mary's daughter and the daughter of her daughter. For the twenty years out of twenty-two years of my life, I did not know that you existed. I did not know that I was Indigenous. The Indigenous heritage of our family was only a "rumour" for many years. I grew up immersed in a white, privileged, non-Indigenous identity and I was taught under Eurocentric worldviews and conventions. I am white-passing, much like your daughter, meaning that I do not experience the prejudice that you may have experienced in your life. It saddened me when I was told that your daughter would never have discussed her Indigenous heritage. I could not believe how someone could deny half of who they are. Although I am only one-sixteenth Indigenous, I want to embrace my heritage and be proud of who I am and those from whom I descend. Just as how I frequently celebrate my Italian heritage by making and eating pasta, I want to normalize the celebration of my Indigenous heritage. Because without you, none of us would have existed. I wish we knew more about you; I wish I knew more about you.

I am writing this letter to you to share my journey from unknowing to knowing, symbolized by the drops of water that I have drawn on these pages. While I am not directly able to learn more about you, I can learn about the Indigenous knowledge, culture, and issues that you may have experienced. This letter is also my research output, one that is non-conforming to Eurocentric academia expectations of formal, impersonal research presentation. I have chosen to use footnotes as my citation style to show the connection between my sources and my knowledge. I was inspired to write this letter by Shawn Wilson's *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008),¹ a reading that uses a similar letter format in its chapters to present an Indigenous research paradigm. Using this style, the reader will have a better understanding of who I am, where I come from, and how I am personally connected to what I have learned during my experience as an assistant to the editors of an Indigenous textbook.

I first learned about Indigenous peoples in my Grade 6 social sciences class where I learned about European explorers and the fur trade with the Ojibwe people, your people. I was so fascinated by the way of life and ways of knowing of the Indigenous peoples that I thought that they were more interesting than the European explorers. Yet, I had no idea that I was a descendant of the Ojibwe. Since that time, all my knowledge about Indigenous people was limited. I heard vague media claims about the poverty, inequality, and resistance of Indigenous peoples, but my non-Indigenous identity hindered me from seriously exploring these issues. When I learned about you and my heritage in 2020, I was stunned. I felt lost. I was happy, of course, to learn that I am a descendant of this land's original peoples who possess a vivid culture and admirable resilience, but I was afraid because of my white-passing appearance and Eurocentric upbringing. I worried about whether I would be allowed to explore my Indigenous heritage and whether I would be accepted. I even declined an opportunity to join a BIPOC round-table discussion at a writing centre conference because I was afraid about expressing my

¹ Wilson, Shawn. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2008.

position and my appearance. After some time, I decided to identify myself as mixed-race Indigenous so that I could be proud of my Indigenous heritage while also acknowledging that I also have settler and immigrant heritage.

In April 2022, I applied for Western University's Indigenous Initiatives' Head & Heart Research Fellowship program because I believed that it would help me learn about what it means to be Indigenous. I also wanted to learn about Indigenous pedagogies that I can apply to my future teaching career. As part of the program, I was assigned to an Indigenous mentor, Dr. Lina Sunseri from Brescia University College, who supported me throughout the program with her guidance and mentorship. I assisted in the editing of the 3rd edition of her textbook, *Racism, Colonialism, and Indigeneity in Canada*. My role as an assistant to the editors has been the ideal starting point for learning about Indigenous issues and ways of knowing because I was able to use the research and editing skills that I developed as an Honours Arts student at King's University College, and as a peer tutor, while reviewing articles on Indigenous issues written by Indigenous scholars. I have learned about criminality and criminalization, environmental racism, poverty, and resistance. These issues have been affecting Indigenous peoples for decades with little sign of slowing down. Perhaps you are familiar with some of these issues. In the following sections, I will describe what I learned from the research articles for each of the four Parts.

Criminality and Criminalization

The criminalization and victimization of Indigenous peoples is notably, but not surprisingly, rooted in settler colonial oppression that continues to marginalize Indigenous peoples and foster complicity from non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.² This has resulted in the prevalence of numerous risk factors, determinant of criminal behaviour and victimization, that are perpetuating a cycle of crime that Indigenous peoples are struggling to break.³ Additionally, it is because of the normalized settler colonial foundation of this country that the criminal justice system sees an overrepresentation of Indigenous people as criminals and victims, oblivious to the issue of race.⁴ In the aftermath of Colten Boushie's fatal encounter with Gerald Stanley, it was Stanley's lawyer who advocated that the case should not be founded on race.⁵ Yet it was the discussion and vocabulary of racial, inferiority, prejudice, and stereotypes that went unnoticed during the trial.⁶ In the end, Stanley was acquitted. In complete, blind complicity, Stanley's lawyer played the "race card" while denying its role at the same time.

Several risk factors affect Indigenous peoples including residential mobility, poor living and housing conditions, poor health and education conditions, poor employment and income, poor family environments, and high rates of suicide, addiction, physical and emotional abuse,

² Monchalin, Lisa. 2016. "Crime Affecting Indigenous Peoples: Over-Representation, Explanations, and Risk Factors" in *The Colonial Problem: An Indigenous Perspective on crime and Injustice in Canada*. by Lisa Monchalin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press pp. 143.

³ Ibid, pp. 143,147,173.

⁴ Starblanket, Gina and Dallas Hunt. 2020. "The Case That's "Not About Race"" in *Storying Violence: Unravelling Colonial Narratives in the Stanley Trial* by Gina Starblanket and Dallas Hunt. Winnipeg: ARP Books. pp.61-62.

⁵ Ibid, pp.64-65.

⁶ Ibid, pp.65.

and abuse from the child welfare system.⁷ I learned that it is possible to remedy these risk factors with Indigenous-focused reforms, interventions, programs, supports, campaigns, and acknowledgements from government institutions.⁸ However, without disrupting the rooted colonial oppression that has resulted in all these risk factors and encouraging non-Indigenous peoples to recognize their complicity and biases, the cycle will continue.⁹

Poor education is the risk factor that stood out to me. Students who do not complete high school are more likely to face criminalization and/or victimization.¹⁰ I understood why this is an issue, given the country's history with horrendous residential schools. I could see why any Indigenous youth would be hesitant to be part of an institution that is connected to so much harm and trauma. As an Indigenous person who wants to become a high school teacher, this was a critical issue for me to understand. How can Indigenous youths be encouraged to continue school without the subtext of assimilation? The solution to this, I learned, is the emergence of Indigenous-focused schools, such as Sir William Macdonald Elementary School, that promote Indigenous values and knowledges with which many Indigenous youth thrive.¹¹ Although I am not sure what kind of school I will teach at, or if I will teach any Indigenous students, this information has given me more confidence to want to indigenize and decolonize teaching.

When I finished the assisting contributions for this first Part and started researching relevant films, I watched a short documentary film called *Life on Victor Street* (2012).¹² In thirty minutes, I witnessed an urban Indigenous family gradually fight back against many of the risk factors that I learned; poor living conditions, educational difficulties, addiction, poor employment and income, gang environment, and an unstable family environment. At the end of the film, the father who became sober has completed his education and gets a job with alcohol and drug addiction counselling services. The film was impactful for me, and it gives me hope that the cycle is capable of being broken. It was admirable to see a recovered person choose to want to work with other people facing similar addictions. The father is breaking the cycle for others after having broken it for himself and I think that is a powerful way to destabilize the colonial foundation of the cycle.

Environmental Racism

The Environmental Racism Part was a new addition to the textbook that led to a refreshing, powerful understanding about Indigenous peoples as defenders of Mother Earth and the relationship between Indigenous women and water. Relationality, the concept of one being accountable to all their human and non-human relations including animals, plants, rivers, lakes, and mountains, is a key concept of the Indigenous cosmivision that came naturally and logically to me. Indigenous critical infrastructure is the salmon and the berries that feed

⁷ Monchalin, Lisa. 2016. "Crime Affecting Indigenous Peoples: Over-Representation, Explanations, and Risk Factors" in *The Colonial Problem: An Indigenous Perspective on crime and Injustice in Canada*. by Lisa Monchalin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press pp. 146,166-170.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 146-147, 159, 163-164.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 173.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 159.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 164.

¹² *Life on Victor Street*. Dir. Kirby Hammond. National Film Board of Canada, 2012.

humans and bears, the rivers that provide clean water, and the seeds that come from bears to sprout new berries to start the cycle again.¹³ When Indigenous critical infrastructure is threatened, the Indigenous way of knowing and being are also threatened.

My knowledge on Indigenous resistance against pipelines was biased by my Eurocentric upbringing that assert that oil and gas pipelines are the only forms of critical infrastructure. This ideal is rooted in the perpetuation of settler colonial violence against Indigenous peoples and their unceded territories, meaning that the Indigenous blockades and encampments are peaceful methods of resisting colonial invasion and protecting their relations with non-human entities.¹⁴ Indigenous peoples view blockades as methods of “standing in place” and asserting their sovereignty and relations with human and non-human entities.¹⁵ They are not just spaces to engage in negotiation, they also provide possibility.¹⁶ However, under Bill C-51, Indigenous resistance to oil and gas infrastructure is regarded as “domestic terrorism” in Canadian legislature as it is threatening the security, as in “economic well-being”, of the country.¹⁷ As a result of this vilification, police surveillance, ticketing, and intimidation were heightened against supporters of the Unist’ot’en Camp.¹⁸ Reading about these actions invoked terror for me, it is no doubt that the supporters experienced terror as well. And yet it is the peaceful, Indigenous anti-petrol protestors that are categorized as terrorists.¹⁹

Indigenous women assert themselves as caregivers, “culture bearers”, “economic providers” and defenders of the water, providing them the potential for making powerful, knowledgeable contributions to the discussion of climate change and environmental issues.²⁰ However, after three declarations spanning over almost two decades, fighting against colonialism with Indigenous feminism, these voices have still gone unheard.²¹ The Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women (1995), the Mandaluyong Declaration of the Global Conference on Indigenous Women (2010), and the Lima Declaration (2013) all emphasize the undeniable relationship between Indigenous women and water and argue that pro-fossil fuel colonialization that displaces water systems has an equally negative impact on Indigenous women.²² Climate change itself has resulted in the loss of land, disaster, and food and water insecurity.²³ The calls for action in the declarations consist of gender sensitive awareness and analysis, workshops, Indigenous women-led research on climate impacts and traditional knowledge and livelihoods, the reinforcement of the knowledge and participation of Indigenous women particularly in decision-making positions, and the consideration for human rights in

¹³ Spice, Anne. 2018. “Fighting Invasive Infrastructures: Indigenous Relations Against Pipelines” in *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 9: 41.

¹⁴ Ibid, 9: 42.

¹⁵ Ibid, 9: 48.

¹⁶ Ibid, 9: 48.

¹⁷ Ibid, 9: 43.

¹⁸ Ibid, 9: 43.

¹⁹ Ibid, 9: 43.

²⁰ McGregor, Deborah. 2020. “Indigenous Feminism Perspectives on Environmental Justice” in *Gendering Globalization, Globalizing Gender*, edited by Gül Çalışkan Don Mills: Oxford University Press pp. 116, 122.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 123.

²² Ibid, pp. 118-119, 121.

²³ Ibid, pp. 119.

establishing climate action plans.²⁴ In essence, the three declarations stress the inclusion of Indigenous cosmivision through the welcomed and respected participation of Indigenous women in global discussions on climate change impacts and efforts to reverse them. If the voices of Indigenous women are acknowledged and accepted into environmental discourse, then it is possible to unmask the continued colonial violence against them and the lands that they defend.²⁵ This connection between Indigenous women and environmental justice is emphasized in the Lima Declaration, as it states that Indigenous experience the same violence that Mother Earth experiences, and thus will protect the environment “with [their] lives”.²⁶ Although the voices of Indigenous women have continued to be unheard, they will not be silent until they are finally listened to.

After I read the articles for this Part, I had a good discussion with Lina about the position of Indigenous peoples on energy development. I mentioned the Wind Farm Project at your band, Henvey Inlet First Nation, which produces renewable energy and provides economic benefit for the band and its members.²⁷ Lina and I agreed that Indigenous people are not completely opposed to energy development. We both drove petrol-fuelled cars to our meeting that day. What we do not agree with is the government enforcing its plans on Indigenous communities and territories without negotiation and without respecting or inviting the sovereignty and knowledge that Indigenous peoples have to offer. Your band, *our* band, Henvey Inlet First Nation, shows that it is possible for the provincial government and an Indigenous community to collaborate on the development of an energy source on-reserve that benefits both parties *and* the environment. I am proud of this.

Poverty and Development

Due to the apparent poverty in many Indigenous communities, there is a growing need for culturally competent and effective Indigenous leadership to engage in modern economic opportunities to reverse the poverty and poor living conditions of their communities.²⁸ As I learned in my Grade 6 social sciences class, historically, Indigenous people were successful in economic development when adapting to European settler presence.²⁹ It is only recently that governments have impeded the economic success of Indigenous peoples through marginalization and colonial racism.³⁰

Several case studies have shown that “best practices” have resulted in improved leadership and economic developmental success in Indigenous communities.³¹ Best practices are

²⁴ Ibid, 119-120.

²⁵ Spice, Anne. 2018. “Fighting Invasive Infrastructures: Indigenous Relations Against Pipelines” in *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 9: 47.

²⁶ McGregor, Deborah. 2020. “Indigenous Feminism Perspectives on Environmental Justice” in *Gendering Globalization, Globalizing Gender*, edited by Gül Çalışkan Don Mills: Oxford University Press pp. 120.

²⁷ “Wind Farm Project Gets Fit Contract.” *Henvey Inlet First Nation*. Accessed August 2, 2022.

<https://www.hifn.ca/departments-2/lands/wind-farm-project/46-wind-farm-project-gets-fit-contract.html>.

²⁸ Calliou, Brian and Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux. 2015. “Wise Practises Approach to Indigenous Community Development in Canada” in *Restorying Indigenous Leadership: Wise Practices in Community Development*. 2nd edition. edited by Cora Voyageur, Laura Brearley, and Brian Calliou. Banff: Banff Centre Press. pp. 31.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 33.

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 33-34.

³¹ Ibid, pp. 35.

methods or processes that have effectively and consistently succeeded in particular situations.³² However, while best practices propose promising techniques, the caveat is that they are not universally applicable to all specific circumstances; they do not account for the unique knowledges, experiences, and assets between different communities.³³ In this way, best practices do not consider the importance of culture as a central focus.

The alternative to best practices is “wise practices,”³⁴ which makes sense semantically. Whereas best practices are isolated from community-specific knowledge and culture, wise practices take these into consideration when used in decisions, tools, and actions towards the development of a community.³⁵ Furthermore, there are seven elements involved in wise practices: identity and culture, leadership, strategic vision and planning, good governance and management, accountability and stewardship, performance evaluation, collaborations, partnerships and external relationships.³⁶ When Indigenous leaders use wise practices, they are becoming competent leaders that can adapt to modern change and benefit from economic opportunities that will benefit the public good rather than simply for monetary gain.³⁷

Resistance

The topic of Indigenous resistance covers the above issues that I have mentioned. However, this final Part gave me two big revelations about how and why resistance is at the center of the fight against colonial violence and invasion against Indigenous peoples. One revelation is how the government can, through injunction, disregard its own laws to ultimately disrespect the jurisdiction of Indigenous peoples on their own lands.³⁸ The second revelation is that the government’s ignorance of its own laws for its own colonial agenda is violating Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution under which the rights of Aboriginal, or Indigenous, peoples are protected.³⁹ In fact, according to Elections Canada’s video, “Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada’s Constitution,” it was Indigenous resistance that led to the implementation of Indigenous rights in the Canadian Constitution, which the government is continuing to violate.⁴⁰ And, in the end, it is the Indigenous peoples who are continued to be regarded as criminals when they are only defending their own constitutional rights.

³² Ibid, pp. 35.

³³ Ibid, pp. 41.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 43.

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 43.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 46.

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 49.

³⁸ Manuel, Arthur. 2017. “The Legal Billy Club” in *The Reconciliation Manifesto: Recovering the Land, Rebuilding the Economy* by Arthur Manuel and Grand Chief Ronald Derrickson. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Ltd Publishers. pp 216.

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 218.

⁴⁰ Elections and Democracy, “Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada’s Constitution,” *YouTube*, 2:07, April 10, 2019, <https://youtu.be/ZLuDiVYPP2E>.

I was appalled by these revelations. I never realized that the country that I grew up in would be so thoughtless and hypocritical. Why hasn't this been examined in mainstream media? Why isn't this constitutional breach a concern of the Supreme Court of Canada?⁴¹

As I think about this, I realize that this is what has been happening all along. From the criminal justice system to environmental racism to poverty, all these issues are rooted in the hypocrisy of the Canadian government and its colonial foundation. By not respecting the lives and ways of living and knowing of Indigenous people, Canada is continuing to break its own laws to continue its settler colonial efforts. Only a few people are recognizing this; Indigenous people like you, like me, like all the scholars (Lina, Monchalin, Starblanket and Hunt, Spice, McGregor, Calliou and Wesley-Esquimaux, and Manuel) from whom I have learned during this experience. I hope that the completion of the textbook will help open the eyes of non-Indigenous students who can help change the world for the better and side with Indigenous resistance.

Conclusion

When I met Lina on July 20th, I had finished the Resistance Part and I was still struggling with the feeling of guilt and ambiguity. I had read so much about the harm of white, settler colonialism against Indigenous peoples that I became very aware of my own white, settler heritage. I also became fully aware that the fact that the suppression of my Indigenous heritage is a result of white, settler colonialism that threatened the existence and growth of Indigenous populations. How could I deal with the idea of being both the complicit perpetrator and the victim? How could I reconcile these two halves that hold two vastly different perspectives? At my meeting with Lina, I finally asked these questions that I had been afraid to ask ever since I learned about you in 2020. Lina revealed to me that she also has Italian heritage, that she has journeyed on a similar path as me, and that she has had to defend her Indigenous side against her Italian side. Lina said that it is a long, slow journey and to be kind to myself. This is what I needed to hear; this is a journey that has been taken by others, I am not alone.

I hope that you have gained a sense of how much your great-great-granddaughter has learned about Indigenous knowledge and issues. Maybe these were familiar to you, maybe they were not. Even though this is just the tip of the iceberg of all the knowledge that I can learn, this is an incredibly good start. I oddly felt connected to you throughout the Head & Heart program. I slowly began to understand why your daughter may have decided to hide her Indigenous half; maybe you tried to protect her, maybe she tried to protect herself, maybe she tried to protect all her future generations so that we would not be implicated in a cycle of crime and hardship. I am grateful to have lived a privileged life so far, but acknowledging my Indigenous identity means that I must recognize that many Indigenous peoples have not lived privileged lives and I have benefited because of that. I hope that understanding some of the prominent Indigenous issues and voices is a step in that direction.

⁴¹ Manuel, Arthur. 2017. "The Legal Billy Club" in *The Reconciliation Manifesto: Recovering the Land, Rebuilding the Economy* by Arthur Manuel and Grand Chief Ronald Derrickson. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Ltd Publishers. pp. 219.

With all this knowledge, I will continue to decolonize and indigenize myself. It will be a slow, difficult journey, but it will be worth it to honour you and our people.

Meegwetch from your great-great-granddaughter,

Morgan Mannella



Bibliography

- Calliou, Brian and Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux. 2015. "Wise Practises Approach to Indigenous Community Development in Canada" in *Restorying Indigenous Leadership: Wise Practices in Community Development*. 2nd edition. edited by Cora Voyageur, Laura Brearley, and Brian Calliou. Banff: Banff Centre Press. pp. 31-59.
- Elections and Democracy, "Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada's Constitution," *YouTube*, 2:07, April 10, 2019, <https://youtu.be/ZLuDiVYPP2E>.
- Life on Victor Street*. Dir. Kirby Hammond. National Film Board of Canada, 2012.
- Manuel, Arthur. 2017. "The Legal Billy Club" in *The Reconciliation Manifesto: Recovering the Land, Rebuilding the Economy* by Arthur Manuel and Grand Chief Ronald Derrickson. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Ltd Publishers. pp 215-219.
- McGregor, Deborah. 2020. "Indigenous Feminism Perspectives on Environmental Justice" in *Gendering Globalization, Globalizing Gender*, edited by Gül Çalışkan Don Mills: Oxford University Press pp. 113-125.
- Monchalín, Lisa. 2016. "Crime Affecting Indigenous Peoples: Over-Representation, Explanations, and Risk Factors" in *The Colonial Problem: An Indigenous Perspective on crime and Injustice in Canada*. by Lisa Monchalín. Toronto: University of Toronto Press pp. 143-174
- Spice, Anne. 2018. "Fighting Invasive Infrastructures: Indigenous Relations Against Pipelines" in *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 9: 40-56.
- Starblanket, Gina and Dallas Hunt. 2020. "The Case That's "Not About Race"" in *Storying Violence: Unravelling Colonial Narratives in the Stanley Trial* by Gina Starblanket and Dallas Hunt. Winnipeg: ARP Books. pp.48-69.
- Wilson, Shawn. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2008.
- "Wind Farm Project Gets Fit Contract." *Henvey Inlet First Nation*. Accessed August 2, 2022. <https://www.hifn.ca/departments-2/lands/wind-farm-project/46-wind-farm-project-gets->

fit-contract.html.