

## Ethical relational space: Autoethnographic reflections on learning from Indigenous mothering

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### Abstract

*In this paper, I aim to centre and attend to the transformative possibilities and power of the intimate, everyday spaces of parent-child relationships in the journey of mental and spiritual decolonisation. Drawing on the concept of “Ethical Space” from Cree legal scholar Willie Ermine, I share what I have learned from insights and wisdom of Indigenous women mentors and writers centring mothering, parenting and family in the work of healing, decolonisation and resurgence. I share two autoethnographic vignettes of my own mental and spiritual decolonising journey, as this is interwoven with my experiences as a mother. My journey grew from, and continues to reciprocate within, the relationships and strength of Stó:lō Téméxw (Stó:lō lands and world) on the Pacific Northwest coast in lands now known as Canada. I particularly share from within my mentorship and friendship with Ts'elxwéyeqw matriarch Lumlamelut (Laura Wee Láy Láq), and in learning from the writing and teaching of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. Both emphasise children's honoured place in family and community and an understanding that governance, leadership, and respect for others' self-determination begin in the cradle of family relationships. I begin to see how the ways of being my mothering passes on are part of what upholds the contemporary colonial reality – and to experience the cracks that make space for other ways of being to emerge. Through sharing pieces of my journey, I aim for readers to witness the power of opening oneself to look into the mirrors held up in relational spaces across differences, and call for a deep reflection on the cultural beliefs and socialisation that shape parenting and family life. From here, we can question whether the beliefs and ways we see in the mirror are who we want ourselves and our children to be/become and what we hope and dream for the collective future they are already part of creating.*

### Key words

Mothering; decolonisation; ethical space; Indigenous knowledge; autoethnography; transformative learning

## Birthing into a Re-searching Journey

I experienced pregnancy and birthed my first child in the middle of my doctoral research – a re-searching of myself, my family and community in the contemporary and historical colonial context of Canada. I hoped to contribute in some small way to the growing call for and efforts toward creating a groundswell of mental and spiritual decolonisation among all people living in and with these lands (For example, Alfred, 2005; Manuel & Derrickson, 2015; Regan, 2011). I approached my research from my positionality as a white, heteronormative, cis-gendered, middle-class Canadian woman of mixed European ancestries and heritages. The questions that drove my research emerged from my own contemporary stories and experiences in relationships with Indigenous colleagues and friends:

What must I transform in myself to be able to create ethical, respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples and lands?

What mentalities and ways of being reinforce colonial hierarchies of knowledge and power in relationships?

What ways of being undermine these hierarchies and make space for authentic connection?

What might be involved in unique journeys of mental and spiritual decolonisation for each of us? What spaces, experiences and relationships initiate, deepen, grow, and sustain these journeys?

I attempted to engage these questions within the everyday and intimate relationships and experiences in my life, drawing on the teachings of Indigenous methodologies (Smith, 2012; Bagele, 2011; Denzin et al., 2008; Wilson, 2008) and autoethnography (Ellis, 1992, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I remain inspired by other scholars who have found a sense of integrity, story, and spirit in their work through blending these approaches (For example, Onowa, 2010; Regan, 2011).

As the significance of becoming a mum gained space in my life – along with my growing belly – it felt imperative and natural that motherhood becomes centred in my research journey. I began considering the above questions in the context of becoming and being a mum in the intimate and influential space of parent-child relationships. In this paper, I aim to name, centre and attend to the possibility of intergenerational relationships and mothering as spaces of transformative learning in our journeys of mental and spiritual decolonisation. I do this by sharing what I have learned *from* insights and wisdoms of Indigenous women mentors and writers centring mothering, parenting and family in the work of healing, decolonisation and resurgence. I share two autoethnographic vignettes of my own mental and spiritual decolonising journey, as this is interwoven with my journey in motherhood.

## Ethical Space: Mirrors & Mothering in Stó:lō Téméxw

My doctoral research grew in the context of existing relationships with Stó:lō mentors and emerging relationships with the lands, waters, sacred stories, lifeways, cultural teachings, and



Mothering [2022], woven by author.

spirit that make up the Stó:lō world. Stó:lō lands include the watersheds that feed into the lower part of the Stó:lō (Fraser) river on the Northwest Pacific coast of what is now called Canada, part of a broader cultural and political place/world of Coast Salish peoples (Carlson et al., 2001). In the Halq'eméylem language of the Stó:lō, the phrase used to describe their past, present and future world, including territory, spiritual realms, and all relations, is “S’ólh Téméxw” (Gardner, 2002; Victor (Hall), 2012). S’ólh Téméxw includes Stó:lō lifeways, wisdom, sacred stories, relationships and shxwelí (life force) of this place. In the words of Elder Joe Aleck from Xwchíyò:m: “Mekw’stam li te S’ólh Téméxw kwelam te shxwelis qas te s’ayelexw.” This is translated as “Everything on our land/world has a shxwelí (life force), has a spirit and is alive” (SRRMC, 2003). While Stó:lō people refer to their lands/world as S’ólh (Our) Téméxw (Lands/World), my mentor and Halq'eméylem language teacher, Laura Wee Láy Láy, suggests it is appropriate for non-Stó:lō people to refer to the physical and spiritual world of the Stó:lō people as Stó:lō Téméxw (L. Wee Láy Láy, Personal Communication, Sept 29, 2017).

The relationships I developed with Stó:lō Téméxw began through my work as a researcher with Stó:lō organisations. Through cultural experiences, mentorship, and reflection, I began to understand my relationship with, and responsibility towards, historic and ongoing colonialism. I began to speak and act, not only from my role, but with my whole being in a conscious relationship with people and place (See Heaslip, 2017). I am deeply grateful for the generosity of Stó:lō colleagues, friends and mentors, and their patience in guiding me on this path. I am grateful to the land and more-than-human relatives who share guidance and strengthen my shxwelí.

I was also incredibly fortunate in the path of this work to meet professors and students in the University of Victoria’s Indigenous Governance program who were involved in the community of Xwchíyò:m, part of the Pil’alt tribe, in Stó:lō Téméxw. I later became a student in this program, a community of learning and praxis that creates spaces for students to grapple with identities, stories, ancestries, gifts, and relationships in the contexts of historic and ongoing colonialism. We were each called, from within the context of our unique positionalities, towards the complex, emergent work of decolonisation and Indigenous resurgence. I gained an understanding that settler colonialism will not be deeply challenged, nor will justice for Indigenous people be found, without a profound transformation of settlers (Alfred, 2005; Regan, 2011). This meant, from a research perspective, interrupting the Western obsession with problematising the Indigenous by intentionally problematising the settler. I came to sit deeply with the question Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith asks of non-Indigenous researchers in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*: “Why do they always think by looking at us they will find the answers to our problems? Why don’t they look at themselves?” (Smith, 2012, p. 198).

I began to consider this work of “looking at ourselves” as settlers, through the theory and practice of “ethical space” articulated by Cree scholar Willie Ermine (2007). The relational spaces of emerging Stó:lō mentorships and the community work I was involved in, as well as the spaces of transformative learning in the UVic Indigenous governance program, are what Ermine calls ‘ethical spaces of engagement’ (2007). These are spaces in which colonial undercurrents become visible; the subsurface attitudes and interests continually influencing communication, behaviours, thoughts, and feelings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are revealed (Ermine, 2007, pp. 197-198). For non-Indigenous people, these spaces hold the immense possibility of being mirrors. As Ermine puts it, they have the potential of teaching “not really about the situation of Indigenous peoples in this country, but... about the mindset of a human community of people refusing to honour the rights of other human communities” (p. 200). Ermine highlights the value in these spaces of learning *from* Indigenous people and

ways rather than learning *about*. Learning *from* involves an authentic openness to allowing these experiences and wisdoms to change oneself. These spaces go far beyond an informative kind of learning to a deeply transformative one in which we are invited to see ourselves anew through the experience of Indigenous ways of being and knowing, and are called to bring one's whole self into the relational context respectfully.

Here, I aim to both practice and share experiences being in an "ethical space," opening myself to see and learn from the many mirrors created through relationships across colonial, racial and cultural differences. In this ethical space, I have come to see the immense importance of a thoughtful and intentional focus on intimate everyday interactions in the intergenerational spaces of family. The insights and wisdoms of Stó:lō and Indigenous mentors and writers in this ethical space guide a deep and ongoing critical reflection on my socialisation into ways of being as a mother. I look into the mirror created through their cultural teachings, and I see the often subtle yet impactful ways in which my mothering is shaped by beliefs rooted in my Euro-Canadian cultural and religious heritage. I begin to see how the ways of being my mothering passes on are part of what upholds the contemporary colonial reality - and to experience the cracks that make space for other ways of being to emerge. I hope my writing will be a way of lingering in these cracks and inviting others in. I hope for other parents, teachers, and caregivers, to feel inspired to listen deeply to the insights of Indigenous women and allow ourselves to look into the mirrors created by this careful listening. What beliefs and ways of being that shape, consciously and unconsciously, our mothering can we see? From here, we can question whether the beliefs and ways we see in the mirror are who we want ourselves and our children to be/become, and what we hope and dream for the collective future they are already part of creating.

### Learning from: Resurgent Indigenous mothering

If we are truly interested in decolonising, we must critically evaluate how we are parenting the next generation. (Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, 2011, p.127)

From that first pregnancy and birth forward, I was guided to centre mothering as a space, a relational context and subjectivity, that has meaning and importance in the collective and intergenerational work of decolonisation. I now have two children aged eight and four. My children's father and my partner is Tunisian-Canadian. He was raised in an Arabic culture and the traditions of Islam in Tunisia, with its own layered history of colonialism and decolonisation. He also holds his own personal and family experiences of racism and anti-Muslim discrimination in his adult life in Canada. This influence shapes our co-parenting and family life, and offers richness, complexities, and challenges in our children's lives. While this is not the focus of my paper here, I want to acknowledge the ways in which I believe co-parenting across differences with my partner has contributed to a more inherently self-reflective parenting journey. As partners, we often ask each other "why?" in trying to understand the other's intentions, values, and beliefs that shape how we approach everyday aspects of parenting. This questioning of simple everyday actions is a generative stimulus for our journeys of self-awareness. It also demands of us a significant level of intentionality in our parenting choices if we are going to be consistent with each other in the areas that really matter. I believe this awareness and intentionality in the space of our co-parenting has supported my own journey of openness to learning from Indigenous women as mentors in becoming/being a mum.

Through my pregnancies and my own ongoing journey as a mum, I have been privileged to receive graceful and generous mothering from friends and mentors that has also allowed me to experience - to feel in an embodied, spiritual, and emotional sense - Stó:lō ways of mothering and the beliefs that guide these. Acknowledging the gift that has been this mentorship, the ethical spaces I have been privileged to be within, I am guided to integrate these teachings into how I am in the world and to share this journey. As such, I share the names here of some of my mentors, raising my hands in acknowledgement and gratitude. I have listed their xwélmexw (Indigenous) names first: Lumlamelut (Laura Wee Láy Láy), Eyem Shxwelí Shlálí (Melody Andrews), Susan Johnny, Sioliya (June Quipp), Xémontalot (Carrielynn Victor), Xwiyálemot (Joanne Guitierrez Hugh), Ts'qwelemót (Wenona Hall) and Kw'itsel Tátel (Patricia Kelly). Each of these women, in their own ways, is thinking deeply about what values and ways of being they want to pass on to the next generations. They each recognise the deep ways in which the *Indian Act*, residential schools, the child welfare system, mainstream public education, and many other colonial institutions have impacted all aspects of Stó:lō life. They are consciously rejecting harmful colonial knowledge and practices, healing in themselves, and making space for Stó:lō ways to guide their journeys with their own children and the many children in their lives. Their decolonial pathways are complex and evolving as they choose not to essentialise Stó:lō culture. They draw on broad experiences and knowledges found in the many relationships they exist in to creatively navigate contemporary colonial realities and nurture the kinds of families, communities and leaders that will honour their ancestors, the land, and future Stó:lō generations.

Their mentorship is a form of mothering. Their giving and nurturing is an ongoing act of resistance to capitalism and colonialism, and is always creating and recreating the other worlds that are possible. Sharing what I have learned and how I am integrating this into my intimate being and relationships is a journey of respect, accountability, and gratitude. It is my hope that it is also a way of centring Indigenous wisdom through reflecting on how it has shaped my own experience. Enacting reciprocity and respect in an authentic relationship means living it and sharing it, breathing it and being it, in the best ways that I can. This authenticity includes recognising that I am always becoming in a constant dynamic of relationships with humans and more-than humans. In the two autoethnographic vignettes that I share below, I have centred on lessons learned in my relationship with Lumlamelut, Laura Wee Láy Láy, and I introduce her and our connection more fully here.

### A Trip to Lhq'a:lets with Lumlamelut

I met Lumlamelut (Laura Wee Láy Láy) as a student in her Halq'eméylem classes more than a decade ago. As our connection grew, she became a beloved teacher, mentor, dear friend and auntie to my children. Lumlamelut's late father was a well-respected leader and cultural knowledge holder in his community of Chi'yaqtel, part of the Ts'elxwéyeqw tribe. Lumlamelut lives in Ch'iyáqtel today on her grandfather's land and is a matriarch in the Wee Láy Láy (Wealick) family. Her mother is from Wei Wai Kum, part of the southernmost group of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples, whose territory spans from central-to-north Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland inlets. Lumlamelut is a well-known and respected ceramic artist and creative spirit working with clay, plant medicines, weaving, and painting. She developed and taught the Halq'eméylem language program at the University of the Fraser Valley for over a decade, mentoring many students in the language, as well as in their creative expressions and journeys through life. Lumlamelut has been a grounding source of guidance, inspiration, perspective, insight, and loving care in my life for many years. I am grateful to her for sharing her way of being in the world with me and for lifting me up many times when I needed it.

Some years ago, Lumlamelut and I travelled with Ts'qwelemót (Wenona Hall) to Lhq'a:lets (Vancouver) to meet Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer, artist, and educator Leanne Betamosake Simpson and hear her speak about her book *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (2011). The long car ride back to Ts'elxwéyeqw (Chilliwack) together was one of rich discussion and reflection, a time I can see now as a turning point in my research journey towards a focus on mothering. It was Leanne Simpson's work that helped me to make the link between what I was learning through grounded relationships with Stó:lō women and the academic literature in Indigenous studies.

Through deep and yet practical engagement with Nishnaabeg philosophy and worldview, Simpson (2011) shares how the practices and values of Nishnaabeg leadership and governance begin in the family context through teachings in stories, experiential learning and parental modelling. She explicitly makes visible and names contemporary settler parenting practices, which she describes as emphasising control, domination, and hierarchy. She contrasts this with Nishnaabeg parenting philosophies and practices, emphasising gentleness, non-interference, and parental modelling (Simpson, 2011, pp. 127-135). Simpson makes clear from within a Nishnaabeg worldview home and family are where children learn justice, governance, and leadership. Reading Simpson's work helped me to elevate and centre the day-to-day sorting out of sibling conflicts, guiding children through learning moments, and modelling, and living my values as a mum, to a place of great significance and meaning. Her teaching counters the mainstream settler colonial norms that severely undervalue and often debase caring for and nurturing children, framing this significant work into a series of menial and mundane tasks that require basic experience or knowledge.

By naming contemporary settler parenting practices, Simpson also gave me a lens through which to consider how the everyday interactions with my children are perhaps subtle but profound in their intimacy and repeated experience. I began to ask in a day-to-day sense whether these interactions uphold or undermine aspects of colonial power, control, hierarchy, manipulation, and consumerism, among others. I have centred Leanne Betamosake Simpson's work in the vignettes below, as her writing has had a significant influence on my own decolonial journey as a mother. Yet, there are many other voices to highlight, and here I briefly introduce a few Indigenous scholars centring on mothering and family in the everyday work of decolonial resistance, healing, and resurgence of Indigenous ways.

Working from within intersections of Indigenous and queer studies, Dakota scholar Kim Tallbear (2013, 2019) critiques racist colonial norms upholding nuclear hetero-patriarchal family structures in state policies and practices. They reveal the violence colonial understandings of family and belonging inflict on Indigenous families, communities and nations and assert the importance of centring Indigenous understandings of kin that uphold Indigenous forms of governance. For Tallbear (2019), a narrative of caretaking relations - both human and other-than-human- is an alternative to the violence of colonial hierarchies. Potawatomi environmental scientist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer also teaches the wisdom of nurturing relations beyond colonial human-centric limits. Kimmerer (2015) brings alive family practices of reciprocal and respectful relationships among all kin, grounding her narrative in her life with her daughters and the everyday acts of ecological restoration and balance that guide her as a mother.

Through grounded storytelling, Kim Anderson (2011) compellingly shares the way Cree, Métis, and Anishinaabe culture and traditions include practices, cycles, and ceremonies that uphold the sacred journey of girls and women through life stages. Through interviews with elders, Anderson shares stories and customs related to pregnancy, birth, postnatal care, and infant and child care. She shares practices related to puberty rights, the roles of women in

different stages and ages of life, and women's roles in supporting the journey of death. Further examples of Nehiyaw (Cree) knowledges, practices and ceremonies related to children are shared in an edited collection, *Ohpikinâwasowin/Growing a Child: Implementing Indigenous Ways of Knowing with Indigenous Families* (Makokis et al., 2020) and in an in-depth and inspiring dissertation *Ohpikinâwasowin: the Life Long Process of Growing Cree and Métis Children* by Leah Marie Dorion (2010). Dorion explains the concept of Opikinâwasowin, which translates in English as “the child rearing way” and is a highly valued aspect of Cree life. Her study highlights thirteen traditional parenting teachings and considers how storytelling and ceremony are central ways in which these teachings are passed down and learned through generations. Her work makes many recommendations for the further revival of traditional parenting, including restoring the power of grandmothers and returning children to the heart centre of contemporary society.

Embracing a worldwide movement of Indigenous resurgence, Kim Anderson has also collaborated with Nishnaabeg scholar and mother Dawn Memee Lavell-Harvard to bring together an edited collection of essays sharing the stories of Indigenous mothers around the world. The book *Mothers of the Nations: Indigenous Mothering as Global Resistance, Reclaiming and Recovery* (2014) centres on the role of Indigenous women and Indigenous ways of mothering in leading decolonisation in families and communities and in reclaiming Indigeneity. Building on and deepening an earlier collection of writing (Lavell-Harvard & Lavell, 2006), this collection is a window into the everyday efforts of Indigenous mothers, grandmothers, and families collectively renewing and living their own Indigenous beliefs and practices in relation to the nurturing of children into Indigenous life-worlds, most often in resistance and challenge to colonial impositions. In both collections, Indigenous mothering is witnessed and upheld as a great force in revitalising and transforming communities and nations. Like the work of Simpson (2011), in this collection, we are shown how the everyday intimate work of nurturing young ones is the grounds from which healthy leadership and communities re-emerge.

In addition to these examples of published works, many more Indigenous women – artists, educators, community workers, health workers, politicians, leaders, mothers – are sharing their reclamation of Indigenous mothering in both place-based communities and online. For example, Andrea Landry, Nishinaabeg from Pawgwasheeng, hosts a blog entitled “Indigenous Motherhood” about Indigenous based child-rearing. She centres on the restoration of “unfaltering kinship” in Indigenous family systems where children are raised to know who they are and where they come from. For her, Indigenous motherhood is the ultimate weapon in destroying colonialism (Landry, n.d.). A recent exhibit of 16 Indigenous artists from diverse backgrounds curated by Saulteaux/Métis artist Autumn Whiteway focuses on the theme “Indigenous Motherhood and Matriarchy.” Exploring this theme through diverse artistic practices, the exhibit demonstrates that despite colonial interference with matriarchal systems and traditional child-rearing practices, “Indigenous women display a fierce resilience, providing strength to our communities, reclaiming and maintaining traditions, and passing on wisdom for the generations to come” (Whiteway, n.d.).

While brief, this introduction is meant to inspire and encourage openness to the possibilities of ethical engagement with Indigenous women's mentorship, writing and creative expressions emerging from their journeys of decolonisation and resurgent Indigenous mothering. These women, in their generous sharing and teaching, have opened the door for each of us to learn *from* their insights, experiences and ways of being. Their storytelling invites us into a powerful ethical space. The mirrors held up in this space create the possibility for us to see the intimate ways colonial mindsets and ways of being may be nurtured in our homes and communities,

created and re-created each generation. For example, looking into this mirror, I begin to see the significant disconnection in much of mainstream Euro-Canadian society from family as a wide-reaching, holistic and more-than-human set of relations into which children are nurtured. I also witness in this mirror a significant loss of the practices, traditions and honouring of life stages that create reverence and respect for women, children, and the journey of birthing and mothering. Listening to the wisdom of these women, I hear the call for attention and focus on family, on the intimate ways in which we relate and nurture, the potential of mothering in the intergenerational journey of decolonisation, and the place of the family in learning practices of leadership, justice, and governance. While I have briefly introduced literature on Indigenous mothering here, it is important to note that there are also many Indigenous fathers resurging Indigenous ways of fathering and emerging literature on this topic (See, for example, Cornthassel and Scow, 2017; Mucina., 2018).

## Sharing Personal Stories from the Heart of Mothering

I now turn to share two vignettes of my personal experience and self-reflections as a mother. These vignettes have emerged from the ethical space of my mentorship and relationship with Lumlamelut and my effort to learn, in a personal and transformative sense, from the writing of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. In sharing these personal vignettes, I draw on critical autoethnographic and Indigenous methodologies, which both engage the researcher's identity and place in the world, personal journey and lived experiences as central to the research itself (Maynes et al., 2008; Kovach, 2008; Regan, 2010). Both approaches create the space for emotions to be open and engaged in the research process and embrace the power of storytelling from the heart. Autoethnography, for example, draws on literary forms of representation, such as thick descriptions and evocative and aesthetic use of language, to generate greater impact by forming deep emotional connections with readers (Ellis et al., 2011). For example, Joanne Yoo (2020), in her autoethnographic writing about mothering in academia, suggests that autoethnographic vignettes create the possibility of sharing the "textures of lived experience by replicating the multi-faceted, fragmented, and affective rhythms of mothering" (Yoo, 2020, p. 3175). This aligns with an Indigenous approach in which researchers engage their whole being in the work, and in the sharing of the stories from their work. Stó:lō educator and scholar Q'um Q'um Xiiem, Jo-Ann Archibald, speaks to the power of storywork in Indigenous pedagogy. She asks storytellers to consider "how can the story be portrayed so that its power to make one think, feel and reflect on one's actions is not lost?" (Archibald, 2008, p. 81). Indigenous storytelling aims to speak to one's heart, mind, body, and spirit, and, as with autoethnography, hopes to connect in a deeper, affective way with the listener/reader.

### Vignette 1 - Woven Stories, Circles & Chains

I know of nothing more important, more difficult, and more purely loving than the nurture of children, be it as a parent, a teacher, or as an artist wishing to serve them well. Children are the ways that the world begins again and again. If you fasten upon that concept of their promise, you will have trouble finding anything more awesome, and also anything more extraordinarily exhilarating, than the opportunity or/and the obligation to nurture a child into his or her own freedom. (June Jordan, *Revolutionary Mothering*, 2016, p. 12-13)

I am sitting in Halq'eméylem class with eight other students, all women, and Lumlamelut as our energetic and passionate guide. In her classes, we learn Halq'eméylem vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in a way that illuminates Stó:lō culture and worldview, brings us closer to ourselves, each other, and the places we connect with; our sense of belonging deepens. Food is shared along with the teaching that as we eat, we take in the good words we hear, and



their energy becomes a part of us. Today, we are learning to introduce ourselves in Halq'eméylem. On the one hand, it is a simple exercise; on the other, it is a revealing reflection on cultural values about self, identity and belonging.

Lumlamelut guides us to include where we are from and the names of our parents and grandparents in our introductions. I feel my own discomfort sitting with this task. I reflect on the ways I typically introduce myself in different settings and acknowledge that rarely, do I name my parents and certainly not my grandparents as part of introducing myself. I might share where I grew up or where I live currently, but the idea of where I'm *from* strikes a different chord, and a difficult one as a settler whose family and ancestors have moved around. Most often, what gets centred when I introduce myself in settler spaces are my educational achievements, job titles, or sometimes my interests. Who I am in these cases is individual, not relational, it's wrapped up in what I do, what I know, or what I like. In Halq'eméylem, who I am is relational; relationships with family, ancestors and place matter, along with my gifts, which are also understood to emerge from relationships. I gently rub my growing belly as I sit in class. I am pregnant with my daughter, F, and hoping the good energy created in these reflections and in this shared space of women are emanating through to her.

A few years later, I made F a baby book and included in it a map of the world showing the lands from which her ancestors left and where they migrated to in Turtle Island: from Ireland, Scotland, and England to Nishinaabeg lands (in Southern Ontario), and from France and Tunisia to Haudenosaunee lands in and around Kawennote Tiohtiáke (Montreal). More recently moving west from Nishinaabeg lands, her maternal grandparents raised their children, including myself, in Amiskwaciy Waskahikan (Edmonton, AB), later moving their family to Lekwungan and WSÁNÉC lands in and around the city of METULIYE (Victoria, BC). F was born in Lhq'a:lets (Vancouver), lived her first six years in Stó:lō and Te'elxwéyeqw territories and now lives in the beautiful homelands of the Quw'utsun people on southeast Vancouver Island. My hope is that she is learning, in an intimate family rooted way, that as much as this is our home, we have come to make a life in the *homelands* of other people – rich in culture, stories, and long-standing reciprocal relationships with land and waters. These long-standing reciprocal relationships, created through thousands of years, are the source of great wisdom about how to live in this place. It took Indigenous peoples many generations to become part of these lands, indivisible from the land itself. With that understanding comes responsibility to the First Peoples of the place we call home and a willingness and openness to learn, create respectful relationships and give of ourselves. This is also the work of many generations.

There is also much to learn about her ancestors, their lives, the complexities of why they left their homelands, what life was like when they arrived, and how they engaged with Indigenous peoples and the colonial context. There are our Scottish ancestors who left dairy farming in Scotland to become dairy farmers on land stolen from Nishnaabeg peoples through colonial practices of unjust treaty making and forced displacement. The privilege afforded to them in owning this stolen land allowed the family to flourish and to be generous and well-recognized leaders in the settler community. During this same time, Nishnaabeg children were forced into residential schools, taken off the land and away from family, community, and Indigenous knowledge. This was a strategy to break the connection between Indigenous peoples and lands, allowing colonial governments to increasingly sell land for settlement, farming, and resource extraction (Simpson, 2017). Nishnaabeg peoples' access to hunting, fishing, wild rice harvesting, and other land-based practices was and continues to be increasingly limited by private land ownership and restrictions (Simpson, 2017), something our ancestors and relatives directly benefited from.

There is also my Irish-Canadian grandpa and his involvement with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) on the west coast. He did search, rescue and surveillance missions in remote settler and Indigenous communities during the era of the anti-potlatch law and residential schools. After the war, Indigenous veterans were treated with disrespect and struggled to receive just recognition and benefits (Ellis, 2019). Meanwhile, my white Irish-Canadian grandpa was greatly rewarded for his efforts and continually promoted into positions of power and privilege with the RCAF.

On her paternal side, there are family roots in Tunisian olive farming and her great, great-grandpa's role in driving out French colonisers from Tunis. This story exists alongside a deeper story of the Arab invasion and colonisation of the Indigenous Imazighen (Berber) people of North Africa. There are also stories of white supremacy and Islamophobia experienced by her Tunisian grandparents and her father in coming to Canada. We can reflect on how these stories of our family are woven with bigger stories of the agendas of empires and the creation of economic systems that are global and based on unjust treatment of people and places. These stories are many-layered, and, importantly, personal - not in a book from the library, but in her book, her-stories and our-stories as a family.

Sqwélqwel is a Halq'eméylem word referring to a type of stories that are an important part of Stó:lō story-telling traditions and pedagogy. Ts'qwelemót, Wenona Hall, describes Sqwélqwel as "personal stories, news and events that belong to one's family and are used to transmit important family history to future generations, to teach life lessons, to affirm kinship ties and connection to territory" (Victor (Hall), 2012, p. 78). She shares several of her own family Sqwélqwel, names their transformative power, and offers her hopes that these stories are still being told seven generations from now (Victor (Hall), 2012). I reflect on the way in which holding up and making Sqwélqwel important in family and community life breathes energy into the complex and rich reality that there is no single story, and that we are all storied people. Passing Sqwélqwel down through generations creates a deeper sense of belonging, perhaps nurturing a more intergenerational sense of responsibility.

After each of the students in Lumlamelut's class shares their introduction in Halq'eméylem, Lumlamelut shares a set of words that reveal the ways in which the Stó:lō worldview is held in the Halq'eméylem language. In Halq'eméylem, the same words are used to refer to great-grandparent as to great-grandchild (sts'ólemeqw), great-great-grandparent and great-great-grandchild (th'ep'ayeqw), great-great-great-grandparent/child (ékwiyeqw), and great-great-great-great-grandparent/child (tómiyeqw). She reflects on what this says about a Stó:lō understanding of time, and the deep, enduring, and cyclical linkages between generations. Leanne Simpson, drawing from knowledge of her elder Edna Manitowabi, also shares a similar understanding rooted in the Anishinaabemowin language: Kobade refers to great-grandparents and great-grandchildren and means "a link in a chain - a link in the chain between generations, between nations, between states of being, between individuals. I am a link in a chain. We are all links in a chain." (Simpson, 2017, para. 21)

I breathe softly, close my eyes gently, and consider the significant way in which this understanding differs from the linear time I am so thoroughly shaped by, a chronological ontology that inherently truncates the value of our ancestors, shrinks our sense of self, our connectedness through space and time and limits the spiritual possibilities of existence. I begin to question all the subtle and yet meaningful ways in which our family might live in "a longer now," a phrase one of my teachers, Jeff Cortnassel, shares with his students, encouraging us to learn our ancestral cultures, histories, and responsibilities, and understand how they shape us today (Cortnassel, 2012, p. 86). I imagine this 'longer now' to be a space-time in which we exist in a complicated interweaving of intergenerational stories and relationships, of beings and

becomings, that guide us in seeing, nurturing, and sharing our gifts, living our responsibilities as a link in the chain.

A number of years later, as I grappled with the struggle of mothering and writing my dissertation, I found it increasingly challenging to soothe my overstimulated mind. Lumlamelut suggested I take up weaving. She gave me a Coast Salish frame loom to try out, and, in her sunlight living room, I learned how to warp it. In the ebb and flow of weaving, I found a mindful practice of balance and a chance to tell a story from a place of gentle, moving stillness. Weaving connects me to place and my relationships here in a Coast Salish world, to my own Scottish, Irish, and French ancestors and ancestral cultures, and to a creative flow that is both spiritually generative and calming. As I move my hands, touch the wool, focus my eyes, my life force, my *shxwelí*, is strengthened. This strength can be shared with others as I carry myself more grounded in the world and through gifting the woven work (See p. 1 for an example of a small weaving). Like family stories passed down through generations, weaving connects me to a longer sense of now. It brings an awareness to the chain in which I am linked, an awareness that rests not only in the mind, but in the heart, spirit, and hands.

### Vignette 2 - Sacred Small Teachers, Clouds

Me: “F, can you please clear the dishes from the table.”

F: “No. I am not doing that.”

Me (Internal voice): “Why is she such an oppositional, disrespectful child?!?” ... deep breath... “Why am I so triggered by this?” What do I fear? Do I fear she will be “lazy” in a world where I have been socialised to think that hard work and industriousness, the protestant ethic of my paternal lineage, is *the* way to a virtuous being? Do I fear I am a bad parent because my child is not obediently following my every command, a belief rooted in Christian patriarchal family teachings in which parents are guided to correct children as an expression of their love? Wait... do I actually believe these ideas, and do I want them to guide my parenting or shape our family?

No. F is just trying to assert herself, her will, to experiment with expressing what she thinks and feels and wants and doesn't want. It is natural and normal and so important for her to develop into a self-aware, confident, and self-determining person. A recent conversation with Lumlamelut comes to mind in which she said, “Self-determination begins with the self.” Being able to respect others' self-determination is grounded in experiencing and honouring your own, and being connected with it. This begins in the home as parents and family members honour the nature of each child's spirit.

Me: “F, there's lots to do to clean up from dinner, and I'd appreciate some help.”

F: no answer

I stop. I look at F... really look. In the quiet, I hear an eagle in the trees outside that seems to call me into stillness. F is absorbed in something, lost in her thoughts, in her being. I follow her gaze out the window. I move closer to see what she sees - she is watching the clouds. I sit and watch the clouds, too. Unlike other days, I don't let my triggers overwhelm my ability to be in the moment with her and to hold her spirit and our relationship above all else. I trust that in an environment that models kindness, respect and support for each other, she will find ways to contribute. In fact, she has already given much at this moment. We linger with the clouds in silence. After a while, I begin to pick up dishes, and she picks some up, too. Her self-determination is respected, and my willingness to enter her world restores our connection and her belonging.

Lumlamelut had a vision to create and support Halq'eméylem based learning experiences for children and parents. She wrote these words in an email sharing her ideas. I have printed and posted it on my fridge:

Children come into this world with gifts from the other side. These gifts are precious, and the children are our treasure. The guardianship of our treasure demands that we are directed by their spirit and their spirit's intentions. It is, therefore, our responsibility to enable them to reach their fullest sentient being potential. (L. Wee Láy Láq, personal communication, April 23, 2016)

Her beliefs about the sacredness of children are echoed in the writings of Indigenous women scholars (see Simpson, 2012; Thomas, 2011, p. 88; Victor (Hall), 2012, p. 289). As stated by Leanne Simpson,

In pre-colonial Nishnaabeg nation, children were highly respected *people*, valued for their insights, their humour, and their contributions to families and communities at each stage of their lives. Children were seen as Gifts, and parenting was an honour. Coming from the spirit-world at birth, children were closer to that world than their adult counterparts, and were therefore considered to have greater spiritual power—a kind of power highly respected amongst the Nishnaabeg. Adults had a lot to learn from these small teachers. (Simpson 2011, pp. 122-123).

Hearing these words, opening to this ethical space of learning *from*, I am unable to look away from the mirror that faces me. I began to ask myself in an everyday sense: Am I living with a sense of responsibility to enable my children to reach their fullest expression of their being? Am I bearing witness to their gifts? To my children as a gift, to parenting as an honour? Just asking these questions calls me to a different state of being as a mum – to a place of greater presence, mindfulness, sensitivity and emotional awareness. I said less, became more consciously observant, and began to reflect more on my own behaviours, intentions and emotions, rather than on what my children should or should not be doing. Why did this feel different, perhaps even awkward, unnatural and challenging? What are the deeply socialised cultural beliefs, values and philosophies that I carry about how to relate to children that make this feel so different?

In mainstream EuroCanadian and Christian rooted culture, children's willful self-expressions are often equated with disrespect and deviance. Parents/adults are considered superior to children; children have a lot to learn, and parents have a lot to teach or correct. Whether stated directly or enacted unconsciously, children are often looked upon as in need of control, management, and shaping. While these attitudes and beliefs may be reinforced through contemporary secular parenting books I've read and advice I've been given, looking deeper into the mirror, I also see their roots in the Christian teachings that directly guided my grandparents' generation. For example, Proverbs 13:24 is perhaps the most often cited Bible verse that relates to Christian beliefs about the role of parents in relation to children. The English Standard Version Bible (2008) states, "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him." Not only does this endorse physical punishment as a way to control and shape a child's character, but it also contains an underlying assumption that the child's character is inherently flawed and sinful, that his soul must be delivered from hell, and that parents have a crucial role to play in this delivery (Miller, 1990). Of course, the degree to which, and in what ways, these teachings are adhered to, understood and applied varies among Christian communities and families, including those who are non-practising but retain a cultural heritage shaped by Christianity.

Corporal punishment and teachings about the hierarchy of adults over children also remain common aspects of disciplinary practice in many non-Christian cultures and households and may find justifications in religious traditions (Elzamzamy et al., 2020). My partner and children's father grew up in Tunisia in North Africa. Family life was guided by North African Arab cultural values and the teachings of Islam. When we first met, he shared with me his fear of becoming a parent as he did not want to have to punish - physically and in other ways - his children. His experiences as a child led to a belief that to parent *was* to discipline and punish children, often in harsh ways. As a child, he felt powerlessness, frustrated and restricted in his being. In becoming a father, he has had to face his own fear of repeating his childhood experience with his own children, and instead look for sources of inspiration and guidance on how to consciously interrupt these learned norms and practice being a kind father. One of the sources of his inspiration has been early memories of his paternal grandfather who, out of step with many of the norms for men and fathers of Tunisian culture, embodied a gentle, calm and peaceful way of being. My partner and I have created an intentional space in our relationship to reflect on our ancestral cultures, religious influences and childhood experiences. The differences in our heritages provides a mirror in itself, and we draw on this as a strength in supporting each other in seeing our unconscious blind spots, in turn, holding ourselves to a deeper ethic of intentionality in what we choose to guide our family life.

My partner's story is not unusual and is echoed in my parents' childhood experiences. Physical punishments, fear and threats as methods of controlling and correcting children were commonly used in earlier generations in many different religious and cultural contexts. Contemporary colloquial perspectives in Canada assume that this has changed in recent generations, yet research on violence and cruelty in Canadian families suggests physical punishment and child abuse remain common (See: Alaggia and Vine, 2022; Afifi et al., 2006, 2014). Child abuse is often directly connected to physical punishment or confused with child discipline, and enacted by a parent whose sense of control is threatened by a child (Coalition on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth, 2007). Further, physical punishment as a form of child discipline remains legally protected in Canada, a protection that was originally introduced in the *Criminal Code* in 1892 (Section 43). This law was upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada as recently as 2004<sup>1</sup>, despite calls by the United Nations for countries to ban all laws that sanction corporal punishment of children, as they are a violation of international human rights (See UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, n.d.). Most recently, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action included a call to repeal Section 43 of the *Criminal Code* (TRC Canada, 2015; #6); so far, this has not happened (See CBC News, 2022). What does this story of the normalisation of children's oppression in Canada tell us when we situate it within the wisdom of Indigenous women such as Leanne Simpson and Lumlamelut, that teach us *family* is where beliefs and practices of governance, justice and leadership are first learned?

Simpson emphasises how highly regarded the work of parenting is within Nishnaabeg cultural values, stating that parents are understood to be a "child's first and often most profound experience with leadership" (Simpson, 2011, p. 127). Parent-child relationships are critically important because they provide the model for all other relationships to follow (Simpson, 2011, p. 127). She further explains that in pre-colonial Nishnaabeg community life, the primary responsibility of parents is nurturing the next generation, and therefore, their contributions to the wider community and nation are kept at a minimum during this time (p. 128). This 'parental

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<sup>1</sup> *Canadian Foundation for Children, Youth and the Law v. Canada (Attorney General)*, [2004] 1 S.C.R. 76, 2004 SCC 4

leave' was highly respected as it was understood that children require a lot of time, and that healthy relationships take time to foster, develop and maintain, and that the quality of the parent-child relationships was the foundation of non-authoritarian parenting (Simpson, 2011, p. 129). Simpson goes on to specifically name some of the differences between Nishnaabeg parenting philosophies and practices, which emphasise gentleness, non-interference and parental modelling, and what she calls contemporary settler parenting strategies, which emphasise control, domination and hierarchy (Simpson, 2011, pp. 127-135). In her descriptions of contemporary settler parenting, I can recognise myself and other parents in my community.

While I (and many other parents of my generation) may have committed to leaving behind the physical punishments, fear and threats some of my forefathers used as parents, the unconscious imprint of adultism and belief in parental control are harder to shift and express themselves in perhaps subtler and more manipulative forms:

“Do you want a red cup or a blue cup?”

“If you get ready right now, you can have a treat!”

“Who can run fastest to the car?”

“Oh, you are upset. Check out this toy over here; it plays music!”

“If you don't clean up right now, you won't get to watch a video.”

I hear my voice in these phrases and that of many contemporary parents in my communities. While it may seem subtle, these are practices of manipulation/false choices, bribery, competition, distraction, and coercion, all normalised tactics for controlling a child, well-worn ones recommended in many mainstream parenting books and approaches. These types of parenting practices rest on a kind of deception whereby we keep from children our true agenda, intention or desire and instead ‘trick’ them into compliance or acceptance, an insidious kind of inauthentic communication (Gordon, 2009). Since this approach to parenting is normalised, settlers, missionaries, and colonial agents in the past and today continue to be critical of Indigenous forms of parenting that do not have control at the basis of the parent-child relationship. As put by Leanne Simpson (2011, p. 123), “Colonizers mistakenly interpreted (and continue to interpret) Nishnaabeg parenting philosophies as “a lack of parenting” because of the absence of punishment, coercion, manipulation, criticism, authoritarian power and hierarchy.”

I can see in myself that part of my tendency towards this more subtle practice of control via manipulation is a desire to avoid the strong feelings of anger, frustration or sadness that may emerge from my children if I tell them directly and authentically what my needs and limits are, and accept the fall out of their frustration because my needs and limits may not allow for their desires to be realised. Letting go of my fear of their emotions and reconnecting with my own authentic emotions, needs, and boundaries is, therefore, a necessity to grow beyond an attachment to controlling pedagogical rules or parenting techniques (Miller, 1990, p. 98). As I continue to let go of this fear and reconnect with my own emotions, I see the ways in which this supports a family context in which we practice and experience contextual and relational ethics rather than look to an external moral code enforced by a hierarchy of adult control. I begin to ask: What is the best possible approach to finding harmony and balance in this situation, in the context of all our various and changing needs, desires, limitations, and boundaries? When I can approach conflict and emotional reactions in this way, I am embodying a different kind of leadership and justice in the family. How, in turn, might this shape my children's developing worldview, including expectations and understandings of leadership, power and justice? As put by Simpson,

Decolonizing parenting techniques means figuring out the kinds of citizens we want to create, the kinds of communities we want to live in, and the kinds of leaders we want to create, then tailoring our parenting and our schooling to meet the needs of our nations... we must rethink how our great leaders of the past were made. (Simpson 2011, p. 127)

More and more Indigenous parents today, especially mothers, are healing from and shedding the influence of beliefs and practices forced into their families through Christian missionaries, the Indian residential school system, the child welfare system and colonial public education systems. Indigenous parents and families are resurging and asserting their own Indigenous philosophies about children and the role of parents and adults in relation to children (Makokis et al., 2020; Lavall et al., 2014; Simpson, 2011; Dorion, 2010). There is a growing recognition, especially among Indigenous women, that this work of reclaiming Indigeneity through mothering practices is at the heart of Indigenous resurgence. It is the grounding from which good leadership, governance, and healthy communities re-emerge (See Landry, n.d.; Simpson, 2011). On this path to healing, what might I and other parents learn from the work and leadership of Indigenous women? The mirror is there, if we open to ethical space; allow ourselves to see it. Indigenous women – mothers, grandmothers, aunts – in their ways of being and the teachings they share guide us to honour and respect the child, give children valued places in family and community, and understand that governance, leadership and respect for others self-determination begins in the cradle of family relationships.

Looking in this mirror becomes a process of questioning my attachments to certain beliefs about my own childhood, my parents and grandparents as people with “good” moral values and my own self as a “good” parent. This questioning of idealised family and self is difficult. It surfaces various strategies of resistance, including a feeling of guilt for criticising my own parents or grandparents – people who have given me so much. As children, we have a strong tendency towards the idealisation of our parents. Especially in an environment where being “good” brings love and affection, questioning the past is a guilt-inducing experience, and this guilt can be a strong barrier to the full realisation of our authentic selves as adults. (See Miller 1990, 2008). Naming and drawing attention to this resistance undermines its power, as does asking myself: Am I a kinder, more present and connected mum when I ask the hard questions and choose to look in the mirrors offered as I learn from Indigenous teachings and practices of parenting? Can I sit with a more complicated story rather than an essentialising truth about my own family, culture and heritage? I lean into the relationships across differences, which continue to challenge me and remind me to look into the mirror, to question what I see, and to ask myself how I want to be and show up in the world.

## **Final Reflections**

Through the above vignettes, I have aimed to share some of the ways in which being in ‘ethical space’ (Ermine, 2007) across the differences of colonialism has challenged me to look deeply into the roots of my own beliefs, values and ways of being. I have looked into the mirrors created in these spaces and begun to see ways my mothering passes on part of what upholds the contemporary colonial reality. Through these experiences and reflections, I have grown to understand that the fully embodied presence mothering demands bring out our most unconscious and intimate ways of being, and these, in turn, are windows of insight into our deeply rooted subjectivities. I have also witnessed and experienced cracks in my own subjectivity - the small spaces in which different ways of being begin.

I hold my hands up in gratitude and in honour of the work that Indigenous women are leading through their storytelling and ways of being in the world, through their everyday mothering. They are showing us in so many ways that when family and mothering are centred in the work of transformative learning, the possibilities of transformation become intergenerational. The possibilities are also far-reaching as these intimate family relationships deeply influence the ways in which our young ones grow to be in spaces of leadership, justice and governance. What kind of leadership is possible when our children know their stories and place as a link in a chain, and are grounded in an awareness of, and respect for, their own spirit and self-determination?

I aim to walk this path of transformative learning as a mum with a co-aligning commitment to active solidarity. Solidarity is grounded in relationship, reciprocity and respect. In my own experience, opening to learning from and changing oneself within and through ethical relationships across differences nurtures an authentic practice of giving back. This giving back is sharing one's gifts, spirit and presence with another in meaningful ways that support their journey. In learning from Indigenous women as mothers, there is a specific responsibility to support their ability to practice Indigenous ways of mothering in their own families and communities. It is not easy to renew and practice Indigenous ways of mothering, and Indigenous parents face many barriers and challenges. As Leanne Simpson states,

Nishnaabeg parenting is not a parenting style that is even remotely supported by settler society. In contemporary times, few of us have the support of extended families and healthy communities to assist us. The legacy of the child welfare system and residential schools means that I have no role models in my family or my community for what I am trying to accomplish. Contemporary Nishnaabeg parents do not have many of the requirements for this kind of parenting at their disposal – the support of extended family committed to decolonising their interactions with children and paid long-term parental leave. We do not necessarily live in communities that are able to gently convey a cohesive set of values to our children. However, many facets of this parenting philosophy are “do-able” in the modern context of many Nishnaabeg families, and I believe they are vital to passing on a legacy of responsibility, hope and love to the next generation. Just as stories stitch together our nation, children are the glue that holds our families together. It is my hope that we begin to honour them as such. (Simpson, 2011, p. 135)

What spaces and positions of power might I, and other non-Indigenous parents, have access to, wherein we can support Indigenous parents, especially mothers, in their own journeys of decolonisation and resurgence of Indigenous ways of parenting? How can we make space for and hold up Indigenous mothers doing this difficult work and help remove barriers to their success? As a start, we can begin by questioning the assumptions, beliefs and values that guide the many settler childcare, education, health and social service spaces and institutions that Indigenous families interact with. We can also use whatever privilege and power we might have to support Indigenous families reconnecting with their lands and waters, acknowledging the power of land-based healing and cultural resurgence in the well-being and self-determination of Indigenous peoples (Alfred, 2023; Josewski et al., 2023).

Finally, I aim to walk this path committed to supporting and creating community with mothers who share a hope for a peaceful, just, loving world. In honouring the gift of mothering mentorship and love that I have received, I, in turn, have a responsibility and honour to share what I have learned, what I have carried with me, and how this gift has shaped my own journey. With a good heart and mind, I hope those of you reading will find something to carry along with you as well. Perhaps you will challenge yourself to enter a space shaped by differences,



be open to ethically being in that space and choose to look into the mirrors that it creates. Perhaps you will allow yourself to experience a crack in your ways of being, even linger in that crack for a while.

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