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MEMORY AND MÉTISSAGE: BRAIDING STORIES WITH THE LAND

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Abstract. This piece gathers a tangle of stories: personal memories, archival fragments, and community voices, to reflect on how Mount Elgin Indian Residential School lingers on the land and in the lives of the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation. It turns to métissage, not only as theory (Donald, 2006; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009), but as a way of living and telling, threading many truths with care. Through this braided approach, the article explores what it means to belong, how memory carries weight across generations, and how accountability to the past shapes our present. Storytelling here is both survival and the beginning of healing.

Keywords. Mount Elgin Indian Residential School, Intergenerational memory, Métissage, Decolonial storytelling

1. Positionality

In coming to this work, I arrive as a Kanien'kehá:ka woman. A daughter. A mother. With stories tied tightly to my family, to my ancestors, and to the Deshkan Ziibiing lands that carry the memory of the Mount Elgin Industrial School. This is how I position myself in the work. It means I can't untangle who I am from where I am. I wouldn't want to. This positioning also resonates with Indigenous autobiography, which Reder (2022) describes as a method of affirming relational identity and grounding self-narration within kinship and land. As Carl Leggo (2010) once wrote, "life writing is all about recognizing one's position and the possibilities of relationship that emerge from a keen sense of location" (p. 76; see also Kovach, 2021).

2. Arrival

"There are stories to help me learn how to dwell in this place"

(Blood et al., 2012, p. 73).

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> "these places are like family and friends to whom we are bound by history, memory and love"
>
> (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 34).

> "Creating texts of métissage implies an attempt to describe the braided and polysemic character of our lives, experiences, histories, and memories that are all, contemporaneously, personal as well as collective"
>
> (Donald, 2016, pp. 24-25).

Storytelling has been part of my vernacular for as long as I can remember. My parents tell me that before I had words, I was telling stories. It's no wonder I'm drawn to memoir as a reader. When someone else's life story takes flight, I'm all in. Fully immersed. The métissage that follows is my first. The feeling of vulnerability in this offering is heightened. To assuage my fears, I take comfort in the words of Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers, and Carl Leggo (2009): "Métissage advocates a reading and writing praxis that constitutes a genuine exchange among researchers and their audience" (p. 12). If I am to hold space for the stories of how others genuinely arrive to a place, I ought to consider how I arrive to this place – this research space – so as to gain some semblance of knowing what it feels like to be on the other side: "I am not from here, just a stranger who comes with gratitude and respect and questions of how it is we come to belong to a place" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 212).

The threads that follow form a braid that marks the beginning of my journey to explore how the remaining physical remnants of the Mount Elgin Indian Residential School impact the Chippewas of the Thames community residing there today. Chambers' (2006) affirms,

> "Visiting . . . is a form of renewal, a way of renewing and recreating people, places and beings, and their relationships to one another" (p. 35). Seeking grounding in the stories that already live; while continuously fanning the flame of curiosity to unearth the stories that have yet to be, I weave my voice and how I arrive to this work with the voices of those from whom I can learn.

2.1. **Methodological Braid.** I write from within the space of life writing. A form of inquiry rooted in the idea that "we write ourselves and we are written" (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. xxvii). Life writing calls for vulnerability. It asks us to locate ourselves. To tell stories, be it through the vessel of journal entries, letters, memories, is not a side note to academic work. It is the method. It's where the head and the heart meet. It's where land, kin, and imagination come into conversation.

In the same breath, I lean into métissage, both as practice and metaphor. This is how I weave voices – mine, my ancestors', the ones found in the archive, and the ones whispered by the land. Donald (2012) describes métissage as a "braided and emergent construction" (p. 544); a way to hold dissonance and to

practice "ethical relationality" (p. 535). For me, it's less of a method and more of a way of being. A kind of openness to the mess of it all. This echoes Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo's (2009) framing of métissage as both literary and life writing practice, a way of tracing mixed and multiple identities through story.

And yet, métissage alone does not fully account for the spiritual, pedagogical, and relational weight of story. This is where I turn to Indigenous storywork, where Archibald (2008) reminds us that "sharing what one has learned is an important Indigenous tradition," carried out "with a compassionate mind and love for others" (p. 2). Storywork insists that stories are gifts, and with gifts come responsibilities of care, reciprocity, and accountability (Archibald, 2008). My responsibility in sharing these stories of Mount Elgin and my kin is not only to document, but to honour, to listen, and to learn. This honouring also lives beyond the page. I carry these stories back into community through dialogue, teaching, and ceremony: small acts of returning that keep the stories alive where they belong. Storywork reminds me that research is not an end in itself; rather, it is a continuation of relation. It must circle back, offering what it has gathered in gratitude.

What holds this work together? It's a braid: life writing, métissage, and Indigenous storywork, each strand supporting the others. Life writing keeps me anchored. Métissage gives me a form to weave with. Storywork reminds me that stories themselves are a way of teaching; of relating. This braided way allows me to hold contradictions. It lets me stay with the complexity of history and memory without the need to resolve. With that comes an ethical weight. These stories are not mine to possess, but to carry with care. My responsibility is ongoing – to keep returning, to keep listening, and to share in ways that nurture the communities to whom these stories belong.

2.2. **Conceptual Terrain.** The conceptual landscape matters, too. There is, indeed, a difference between place, space, and land. In Western frameworks, place tends to be something fixed; mapped out. Space can feel abstract, maybe even empty. But land – in Indigenous thought – is alive. It holds stories, and we listen: "Place and land are our teacher" (Kovach, 2021, p. 75). To speak of Mount Elgin as a "site" or a "place" risks erasing deeper relationality. To speak of it as land insists on kinship, responsibility, and the enduring presence of those who walked, suffered, resisted, and survived there. As Chambers (2006), writes, "the land is the best teacher I have ever had" (p. 27).

2.3. **Invitation.** This work, then, is not simply narrative but analytical. As Leggo (2004) offers, "I write in order to know" (p. 144), and the stories shared here are more than recollections. They are actions. They say, we remember, we resist, and we carry on. These stories are also invitations. Donald (2019) asks, "How can human beings best live well in the world today?" (p. 103). My answer? Through story. Through remembering, re-membering, and being willing to weave grief with hope, land with memory, and past with present.

3. Thread One: Finding Annosothkah

Six Degrees of Separation is an MGM film made in the early 1990s. It's based on a saying that refers to the idea that any two people in the world are connected through a chain of no more than six social connections. It's also a notion that has significantly surfaced in my own life relatively recently, connecting generations upon generations, in ways I could have never imagined.

On September 29th, 2023, I attended a film screening at the Wampum Learning Lodge at Western University in honour of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. Having attended a number of events leading up to the culminating screening, I was aware of the film to be shown – The Nature of Healing (2023) – a documentary featuring seven Survivors of the Mohawk Institute Indian residential school, also known as the Mush Hole, in Brantford, Ontario. I had even gone as far as sending a message to the documentarian, Faith Howe, ahead of the screening to express my gratitude for her work and share that I was also following the path of unearthing stories of one of Canada's Indian residential schools – the Mount Elgin Industrial School in Muncey, Ontario. Faith replied to my message immediately and insisted that we connect during the reception following the screening. After witnessing her unbearably, hauntingly beautiful film, we did so, and embraced without hesitation. We were connected in that moment – it was undeniably palpable. Faith is Mohawk from Six Nations of the Grand River: I'm Mohawk from the Tyendinaga Territory. With tears in our eyes, we thanked each other for our respective work, and she offered her support and guidance as I begin my storytelling journey, insisting that we keep in touch along the way.

Demand for Faith was high during the reception – the lodge was full of people wanting to express their deep appreciation for her stunningly heartbreaking film. I've been carrying her parting words since that day: "your ancestors are always with you; they will be guiding you." Our eyes welled up yet again, and we embraced one last time honouring the mutual feeling that we've known each other for longer than our ten-minute interaction allowed. What Aoki (1983) names as the wisdom that emerges from living at the margins resonates: "a condition that makes possible deeper understanding of human acts that can transform both self and world" (p. 325). In that moment, surrounded by Survivors and their families, two Mohawk women met across geographies and generations, recognizing kinship in story.

Six days later, my parents arrived. After dinner on the first evening of their visit, my dad shared a book with me – something he had been longing to do. Yonkwakà:ratons Aetsitewatonhnhakwatà:ko': Healing Through Storytelling (2021), a commemorative book in honour of Kenhtè:ke (Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory) community members who attended the Mohawk Institute, the Mush Hole, in Brantford, Ontario. Upon laying the book on the table, my dad said, "Many, many of your ancestors are in this book." Until that moment, I had only known about a handful. Suddenly, I was aware of them all. Their faces telling stories I would never hear, but eerily reminiscent of the faces in the film I had seen just six days earlier.

I was immediately drawn to Sampson Green – Annosothkah – my sixth great grandfather, and the first elected Chief of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte in 1869 (Tsi Tyónnheht Onkwawén:na, 2021). Since that October evening at the dinner table with my dad, I've been pouring over archives of Annosothkah's letters to the Crown dating back to 1879 where he thoughtfully advocates for educational advantages for the Indian child who, in his words, "expresses a growing desire for learning" (Government of Canada, 1879). Reading these letters, I felt the weight of what Donald (2009) calls layeredness: "an ethic of historical consciousness . . . the past occurs simultaneously in the present and influences how we conceptualize the future" (p. 7). Annosothkah's words reached across centuries, folding into my present, and shaping how I imagine the work ahead, reminding me that to write him now is to enter into that same layered temporality.

I feel a kinship with Annosothkah, not unlike the one I felt with Faith upon our first meeting. I can't talk to Annosothkah nor embrace him the way I was able to with Faith. Instead, I write him letters – a practice that has unfolded organically over the last few months. One that feels both intimate and scholarly. An enactment of what Richardson (2000) names "writing as a method of knowing" (p. 940). I found myself wondering what Annosothkah might share about his experience at the Mush Hole. Would it be akin to the travesties the Survivors spoke of in The Nature of Healing? I imagine the conversations that might emerge between us as I voice the questions that weigh heavy on my heart:

Dear Annosothkah,
How do we honour the spirit of the land?
Do our words inspire a call to action?
Where is the reciprocity?

I fear we've lost the thread of our connection to the land.
There is such trauma.
How do we weave our way back?

We have absolved ourselves of responsibility of all that came before
You Survived. You went on to lead.
I ask for your help in shifting our apathetic mindset.

We have become siloed in our ways of being.
It is time to remember.
How do we move outside of ourselves and take in each other?

(Personal Journal Entry, April 10, 2024)

FIGURE 1. Annosothkah (Sampson) Green (Tsi Tyónnheht Onkwawén:na, 2021, p. 39)

There is comfort in this practice. Simpson (2017) writes of "the intense love of land, of family, and of our nations that has always been the spine of Indigenous resistance" (p. 9). My letters are acts of that love. I feel Annosothkah's presence through my letters as palpably as I felt Faith's in our embrace. I'm grateful to have them both alongside me as I navigate the journey ahead.

4. Thread Two: The Writing on the Wall

I'm astounded by the signs of life by the monument.
Families have built their homes here.
Gardens are tended to.
There's even a SLOW DOWN: CHILDREN PLAYING sign on the road.
The irony of which is striking.
There's a young man stoking a sacred fire.
He and I are the only people here.
The leaves are falling in response to the autumnal breeze.
Mother Nature is readying for her hibernation
as I'm readying to open up and surrender to this journey
with the hopes that my ancestors will guide me
along the way.

(Personal Journal Entry, September 30, 2023)

My first visit to the Mount Elgin Residential School Monument was on September 30, 2023: The National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. I did this in an effort to better understand the breadth of the land I'm referring to in my evolving doctoral work: "Indigenous Métissage is about particular places in Canada . . . that have contentious histories in that the stories that Aboriginal peoples tell of them do not seem to coincide with Canadians' histories and memories of those same places" (Donald, 2012, pp. 541-542). I ask myself, what is known about this place? Donald (2019) asserts that "people do not think about their mythologies; they think with them" (p. 108). Moreover, I wonder, "How can buildings hold power over a community's healing and the process of reconciliation?" (Boffa, 2017, p. 11). The mythologies Canadians carry about residential schools – as not-so-distant past, as necessary progress – contrast sharply with the living memories of the Chippewas of the Thames.

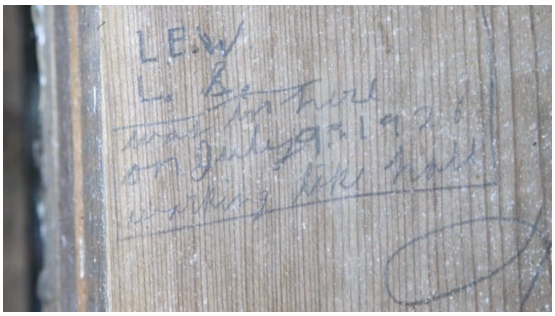

FIGURE 2. "L. E. W. was here on July 9th, 1926, working like hell" (London Free Press [LFP], 2012)

The Chippewas of the Thames First Nation sits on the banks of the Thames River in Muncey, Ontario. On this land are remnants of the Mount Elgin Industrial Institute – Canada's second oldest Indian residential school. (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015, xvii). Living amongst these remnants are members of the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation. Operating from 1850 to 1967 (TRC, 2015, xvii), the Mount Elgin Industrial Institute is one of approximately 17 out of 140 Indian residential schools whose fractal, physical structure remains (Parry, 2017). The Chippewas of the Thames community has launched a meaningful initiative to preserve the remaining remnants of the Mount Elgin Industrial Institute: "'as long as it stands this building commemorates the resilience of our spirit – that we could survive against those kinds of odds'" (Chambers, 2006, p. 31). The focus is on restoring an old barn, the sole surviving structure, to honour and remember the children who attended the school (Leon, 2021). The barn, inscribed with etchings from former students forced into labour and stripped of their identities, stands as the sole, silent witness to the harsh realities they faced.

Chambers (2012) writes, "stories travel; some have legs" (p. 29). These etchings, some dating back to 1909, are powerful symbols of resilience and resistance (LFP, 2012). They continue to travel across time, refusing silence. The Chippewas of the Thames community envisions transforming the barn into an

interpretive centre, capturing the history of the residential school while revitalizing the Chippewa's cultural and linguistic heritage (Leon, 2021). This initiative is part of a broader societal reckoning with the grim legacy of residential schools, which has gained urgency following the discoveries in recent years of unmarked graves at former residential school sites across Canada (Supernant, 2021), evoking Chambers' (2006) sentiment:

> We gather to remember that it is possible to survive, that [it] is possible to laugh and cry in the face of the precariousness of life, in the face of mourning and violence – past and present – and that perhaps, it is even necessary to do so. (p. 35)

When revitalized and reclaimed, it is the community's vision that the interpretive centre will be a dynamic space for cultural rejuvenation, facilitating the (re)learning of traditional skills, language, and knowledge lost over generations: "Like relatives, places must be fed and cared for" (Chambers, 2006, p. 34). Sitting at the heart of the Chippewa community, the reclamation project is an expression of a deep desire to provide their youth with a profound understanding of their heritage. As Simpson (2017) urges, "I want my great-grandchildren to be able to fall in love with every piece of our territory. I want their bodies to carry with them every story, every song, every piece of poetry" (p. 7). Simpson's (2017) insistence echoes the voice of Gina McGahey (2021), director of Language and Culture for the Chippewas Anishinaabe'aadziwin (Our Way of Life) Department when she shares, "We don't want our children not knowing who they are . . . You have to understand your past to move forward" (Leon, para. 22).

Donald (2016) poses a critical question: "From What Does Ethical Relationality Flow?" (p. 10). Embracing the notion that ethical relationality "guides us to seek deeper understandings of how our different histories, memories and experiences position us in relation to one another," I hope to unearth the stories surrounding Mount Elgin and the indelible impact they have on the community by putting "respect and love at the forefront of [my] interactions" (Donald, 2016, p. 10). Lending my heart to the (re)discovery of a "guiding ethos" and carving out space for voices beneath the surface to rise and be heard, I endeavour to disrupt colonially cloaked denial, use the strength of the braid, and embody the reverberating refrain, "*it's about us for good life again. find our place again*" (Donald, 2016, pp. 15-16). In this way, my presence strengthens both text and self. Richardson (2000) suggests that "The deepened understanding of a Self deepens the text" (p. 936). As I stand at Mount Elgin, my scholarly work and personal knowing become inseparable, each thickening the braid of relation.

5. Thread Three: Nii Ndahlohke

Inspired by relatives who attended the Mount Elgin Industrial School between 1904 and 1912, esteemed historian, Mary Jane Logan McCallum (2022), offers a glimpse into the lives of students in relation to place in *Nii Ndahlohke*, a Lunaape phrase meaning "I work." Steeped in archival research, *Nii Ndahlohke* sheds light on the manual labour at Mount Elgin, "While it was common for

FIGURE 3. Mount Elgin Students in Uniform, ca. 1909 (McCallum, p. 12, 2022).

children to contribute to the labour of a family farm at the time, Mount Elgin student labour was excessive even by contemporary standards" (McCallum, 2022, p. 23). A compelling work, *Nii Ndahlohke* is a significant offering to the collective understanding of residential schools and their impact on Indigenous communities:

> Mount Elgin students worked hard and shouldered more responsibilities than they ever should have. This truth did not escape the students, their parents, or their First Nation communities. In 1894, the Chippewas of the Thames Band Council complained that students worked too hard and that the church was profiting from their children. This would not be the first nor the last complaint about Mount Elgin registered by the band. Parents and school inspectors also wrote letters about poor conditions at the school. (p. 23)

Nii Ndahlohke meticulously documents the lived experience of Indigenous people who endured the residential school system. A member of the Munsee Delaware Nation, the neighbouring reserve of the Chippewas of the Thames, McCallum (2022) offers a deeply researched and personal perspective in *Nii Ndahlohke* that connects historical documentation and personal testimony: "The story about Mount Elgin told here is one of many – it is not the full or only history of Mount Elgin. This book relies on family histories, archives, photographs . . . Other sources might tell other stories" (p. 14). Kovach (2021) reminds us that story is not simply data, but a method of knowing that carries relationship and responsibility. McCallum's (2022) insistence that "other sources might tell other stories" (p. 14), reflects precisely this: that no single narrative can contain the fullness of memory.

Centring her words around the Mount Elgin Industrial Institute, McCallum's (2022) double-edged approach provides readers with a heartbreaking understanding of the systemic injustices and cultural genocide perpetrated through residential schools:

> Children, too, complained. When their complaints were not heeded, the children resisted working in a number of ways. For example, they ran away from school by themselves or in small groups. They would run along paths, train tracks, and roads, depending where they were headed and how far they had to go. They would go to homes of First Nations family and friends or even strangers nearby, on other reserves, or in other villages and towns. When the school discovered their absence, the principal would alert the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the local truant officer to find the runaways. Students ran away because they were lonely and missed their home and the people who lived there, because they were hungry, and because they were tired of all the work. (p. 23)

These stories of running away remind me of Aoki's (1983) insistence that "I should learn to see life within the fullness of a double or even multiple vision" (p. 334). To read these histories is to hold assimilation and resistance in the same hand. Notions that clash, yes, but together reveal the distortions imposed on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis lives, and the acts of courage that sought to rewrite history despite them.

Nii Ndahlohke confronts the stark realities of a colonial education system designed to assimilate Indigenous children, echoing Donald's (2019) sentiment, "our knowledge and worldview today would be greatly altered had the foundational thinkers of our schooling cultures acknowledged that there was history beyond the beginning of their version of civilization" (p. 114). McCallum's (2022) narrative highlights the physical, emotional, and cultural traumas inflicted upon these children, as well as the intergenerational impacts that continue to resonate within First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities today. Reading McCallum's (2022) words, I feel the weight of what endures. Breathing through generations, these stories call us to see how the violences of schooling were never only about discipline or education, they were about separation and the attempted unmaking of kinship. In the traces left behind – in names etched into barn walls – there is endurance. To attend to these stories is to recognize that remembrance itself is an act of resistance: a way of refusing erasure and re-storying what was meant to be forgotten.

Whereas McCallum's (2022) words exemplify how First Nations, Inuit, and Métis scholars and storytellers can reclaim their narratives and assert their voices, Donald (2019) suggests, "To properly address Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum, Canadians need to re-discover the historical and current connections between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people in Canada, even if these connections are not always pleasant to discuss" (p. 25). This reclamation is essential for decolonizing the historical record and ensuring that Indigenous experiences are accurately and respectfully represented. As Chambers (2006) reminds us, we must acknowledge what needs to be remembered, even when the remembering

unsettles us. Proclaiming that we stay with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), McCallum (2022) encourages a movement beyond that of a superficial acknowledgement of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis history in Canada – it's time to get comfortable in confronting uncomfortable truths: "Transformation is not accomplished by tentative wading at the edge" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 89). To stay with the trouble also means to stay in relationship; to carry these stories beyond the page and to let them unsettle how we think. In this way, the work of transformation becomes less about arrival and more about the ongoing practice of listening, witnessing, and re-storying together.

Truth and Reconciliation require an ongoing commitment to learning and unlearning. *Nii Ndahlohke* is a testament to the power of storytelling as an integral element of this process. Archibald (2008) reminds us that "The power of a story is shown through stories about a story" (p. 85). McCallum's (2022) offering holds that power. Extending beyond the page, *Nii Ndahlohke*, inspires action and dialogue, contributing to healing and justice for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.

6. Loose Strands to Carry On

This is not an ending; it is a gathering of a story. The stories shared here – of Annosothkah's letters, of the barn at the Chippewas of the Thames, of McCallum's (2022) *Nii Ndahlohke* – are strands of a larger braid. Each reminds me that the practice of story-sharing is living, and it calls me into relation.

The methodological braid has held me: life writing roots my arrival, métissage weaves together voices, and Indigenous storywork reminds me that stories are gifts bearing responsibility. Together, this braid strengthens what is required to navigate the complexity of history and memory. What remains, then, is continuation. Truth and Reconciliation are not something to arrive at; rather, they are practices: of remembering, resisting, and reweaving. As Archibald (2008) offers, "Sharing what one has learned is an important Indigenous tradition . . . and is done with a compassionate mind and love for others" (p. 2). This sharing – this offering – is a beginning. The braid does not end here: it will continue to weave for generations to come, so long as we honour our ethical responsibility to tell the threads of our stories.

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