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# The Haudenosaunee *Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen* Thanksgiving Address: Moving Beyond the Havoc of Land Acknowledgements

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**ABSTRACT** This article offers a concrete example of how engagement with the Haudenosaunee *Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen* (Thanksgiving Address) provides foundational Indigenous knowledge education for elementary school age children at the Jackman Institute for Child Studies. We propose a critical rethinking of the practice of land acknowledgements by sharing the Thanksgiving Address as an Indigenous knowledge pedagogy. We provide a critical examination of institutionalized land acknowledgments and the inherent havoc they present, as well as a brief overview of the history and practice of the Thanksgiving Address. Our goal is to show how scaffolding Indigenous knowledge for elementary school children can be done in ways that are ethical, respectful, and careful. We also provide a broad theoretical engagement with the Thanksgiving Address as an ontological orientation that offers insight into land-based pedagogical approaches that take up Indigenous knowledge education.

**KEYWORDS** Indigenous knowledge education, *Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen* (Thanksgiving Address), Indigenous resurgence, land-based education, land acknowledgements

In an era of Indigenous resurgence, Indigenous knowledge and practices are being activated for the betterment of Indigenous communities, and in some cases for the betterment of the world. In many education spaces in what is colonially known as Canada, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and students are taking up the call to remember, centre, and learn with Indigenous education oriented in the politics of reconciliation. One way that many public education systems have responded to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action is by implementing land acknowledgements at assemblies and including them in morning announcements alongside the national anthem. As this specific practice has become more commonplace over the past two decades, the empty gestures of performative allyship (Blair, 2021, p. 54) reinforce the "settler colonial curricular project of replacement [that] is invested in settler futurity" (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 79). What has ensued reinforces settler colonial logics that are enacted through the "empty apologies, backlash,

appropriation of the other's pain and culture, and ambiguous relationships in the name of allyship" (Kouri, 2020, p. 61).

Considering the havoc that has been created by settlers through the institutionalization of land acknowledgements, we look to Indigenous knowledge systems and practices that teach the necessary ontological orientation of relationality through the practice of gratitude with the human and more-than-human world. We imagine this as a way of cultivating land-based education<sup>1</sup> that centres Indigenous knowledge that includes an unsettling of settler colonialism to support and honour the practice of land acknowledgements as it has always been intended. In this article, we provide a concrete example of how the praxis of Indigenous knowledge education, specifically through the Haudenosaunee *Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen* (Thanksgiving Address), shaped the learning of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at the Jackman Institute for Child Studies (JICS). Further, this learning also laid the foundation for grade six class's in-depth learning about colonial history that preceded their efforts to enact land acknowledgements. We share how students at JICS developed a relational orientation that is much more suited to the junior grades, while scaffolding ongoing and essential learning that includes historical and colonial practices is more appropriate for grade six students. This critical education is a requirement for enacting culturally reverent land acknowledgements. Our engagement with JICS has demonstrated that the Thanksgiving Address is foundational Indigenous knowledge that can support elementary school age children in developing the values and orientations to the interconnectedness of land that is central and essential to Indigenous knowledge education and practice. While this age group is the focus of this paper, we also acknowledge that learners of all ages can benefit from this Indigenous teaching and pedagogical approach if there is meaningful and personalized engagement.

When considering gratitude, we recognize that diverse Indigenous nations across the continent hold the practice of giving thanks that acknowledges the responsibilities to the web of relations that exist in the world and bring Indigenous peoples into community in a good way (Invert Media, 2006). We engage specifically with the Thanksgiving Address because it is Indigenous knowledge that has been generously shared with the public. Freida Jacques, Onondaga Clan Mother of the Onondaga Nation, refers to the Thanksgiving Address as "one of the most important parts of our culture that can be conveyed to the outside world" (Skä•noñh Great Law of Peace Center, 2016). Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), Potawatomi scholar and writer, refers to the Thanksgiving Address as "a gift of the Haudenosaunee to the world" (p. 116). When Kimmerer (2013) asked Oren Lyons, Onondaga Faith Keeper, about sharing the Thanksgiving Address, he said, "[o]f course, you should write about it. It's supposed to be shared otherwise how can it work?" (p. 116). We consider this generosity an open invitation to activate and engage with this Indigenous Knowledge practice.

Educators can rely on many resources that share how to cultivate education spaces oriented to the practice of 'giving thanks' depending on context and local knowledge systems. In this

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1 Here we are working with the understanding of land-based education as described by Tuck et al. (2014) that includes the "analysis of territoriality and settler colonialism" (p.3), and centers Indigenous realities and perspectives by identifying commonalities across global Indigenous Knowledge systems and land-based practices of relationality (p. 3).

paper we centre the Thanksgiving Address because of our relationship to the land we live, learn and work on, and our desire to offer an example of how Indigenous knowledge can be centred in education spaces. Our wonderings about the state of institutionalized land acknowledgements and the Thanksgiving Address have been supported by respected Knowledge Sharer, and former Hereditary Wolf Clan Chief – Kaliwahe (Matt Ireland) from Oneida Nations of the Thames, and Giidaakunadaad (Nancy Rowe), a valued Traditional Practitioner of Anishinabek lifeways from the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. This article and the learning that took place at JICS is also supported by the following resources:

1. Tom Porter's *And Grandma Said...Iroquois Teachings as passed down through oral tradition* (2008)
2. Mohawk's *A Seneca Greeting: Relationships Require Us to Be Thankful in Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future* (2008)
3. Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte (2019)
4. Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweet Grass* (2013)
5. Michelle Corneau's *The Thanksgiving Address in Strong Stories Kanyen'keha:ka* (2016)

In offering the Thanksgiving Address as a way to remedy the havoc of land acknowledgements, we want to stress that there is an important distinction between respectfully referencing and citing Indigenous knowledge teachings, like the Thanksgiving Address, and doing ceremony. For non-Indigenous educators, please be mindful that when a Thanksgiving Address is offered by an Elder or an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper using sacred plant medicines in a smudge, or offering a fire, or a song and drumming, that practice is honored as ceremony. When a Thanksgiving Address created by a respected Indigenous educator, Elder or Knowledge Keeper is cited and referenced in a public space, like a school, that recitation is not the appropriation of the ceremony but a teachable moment that centres Indigenous knowledge education and practice.

## **Who We Are**

### ***Indigenous Educator Perspective – Jennifer Wemigwans***

I am an Anishinaabe scholar and mother from Wikwemikong Unceded Territory on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. As an educator, I was trained in the field of adult literacy by Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Their instruction was transformational because their knowledge came from another paradigm informed by Indigenous knowledge, methodologies, and pedagogies. Indigenous approaches to learning require “many cups of tea”—an expression used by Elders that suggests we need to sit and *visit in conversation over time*, in a way that helps us look at ideas from many angles (Castleden et al., 2019). This introduction to Indigenous knowledge education began in the 1990s and has informed my research, pedagogy, and practice. Since then, I have continued to work with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders in the role of a Helper. A Helper is understood to facilitate and support and not usurp the knowledge or translate the knowledge that comes from Indigenous communities. In this way I work

very carefully with Elders and Knowledge Keepers to actively support the teachings they want to convey. I reject the word ‘indigenizing’ as a verb as it does not speak to the generous teachings offered by Elders and Knowledge Keepers. They do not ‘indigenize.’ They teach! Indigenizing for me is the addition of the proverbial feather to content where something is added superficially without careful consideration or even a reimagining of practice or pedagogy. Indigenous knowledge practice and pedagogy is transformative and represents a paradigm shift away from colonial public education content. In respect to the contributions by the Elders and Knowledge Keepers mentioned above, and in conversation with each other, Lanna and I have written this article as an introduction to the Thanksgiving Address as a way forward for respectful inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge education and practice into the curriculum.

### ***Non-Indigenous Educator Perspective – Lanna MacKay***

I am a non-Indigenous woman born and raised on the lands of the Anishinaabe peoples who have always and currently live along the shores of Lake Superior in Robinson Huron Treaty Territory #61. I began learning about colonialism and Indigenous knowledge systems in 1995 when I was a student and research assistant for Sami scholar Kaarina Kailo at Concordia University. In more recent years, I have been learning, unlearning and relearning (Toffler, as cited in Kenyon, 2022, p. 27) by engaging in community and education spaces like the *Fostering the Emergence of the Good Mind* program with Mohawk healer Diane Hill from Six Nations of the Grand River, and at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. These experiences have allowed me to support myself, students, educators, family, and community as we attempt to navigate this era of accountability and Indigenous resurgence with honour, dignity and respect. My professional practice has changed from one that includes Indigenous education, to one that centres Indigenous knowledge and settler colonialism. Becoming increasingly attuned to the “everyday acts of Indigenous resurgence [that] are taking place” (Simpson, 2017, p. 195) supports necessary change in all aspects of my life. Learning revealed through the activation of the Thanksgiving Address and the ongoing conversations with Jennifer and Kaliwahe have been integral to this learning process as I continue to move away from acknowledgement and the politics of recognition (Coulthard, 2014, pp. 27-42), towards fostering Indigenous resurgence and educator accountability in classroom spaces. Collaborating on this project has been a great honour.

### **The Problem with Land Acknowledgements**

While it has always been understood by Indigenous peoples that land cannot be owned, there has also been an understanding that those who live on particular lands have a relationship and responsibility to the land that they call home (Asch et al., 2018; Kimmerer, 2013; Simpson, 2017). This relationship informs local land-based knowledge that is valued and respected by Indigenous visitors, who understand that kinship systems extend beyond people to the land upon which they live. For Indigenous peoples, land acknowledgements honour the territory of diverse communities by recognizing the *relationship* that exists between the people and land. They also illustrate the way that Indigenous communities practice values

of respect and etiquette when visiting a territory that is not their home. In addition, there may be wampum agreements<sup>2</sup> between them that honour historical peacemaking alliances, or protocols that are situated in longstanding relationships between communities like the Six Nations Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

Conversely, the practice of institutionalized land acknowledgements that have become prevalent within settler contexts are “rhetorical devices that reference a mythical fabrication of Indigeness that is consistent with settler dreams of benevolence and innocence” (Wark, 2021, p. 191). Asher et al. (2018) go on to state that “by removing their relational origins, institutionalized land acknowledgements have colonized cultural protocols to legitimate stolen land (as cited in Wark, 2021, p. 198). Deborah McGregor (2021), Anishinaabe scholar and Canada Research Chair from Whitefish River First Nation, conveys this sentiment precisely when she states that institutional Land Acknowledgements that reference the Dish with One Spoon create a false impression that this wampum covenant opened First Nation territories to *all* nations:

The incorporation of the Dish with One Spoon blurred the territoriality of the message by suggesting that First Nations had agreed to share the land. In this way the environment took underlying precedence and everyone – even colonial settlers – had a stake in the territory.

In this way, through the appropriation of the Dish with One Spoon, governments have, in effect inserted themselves into a covenant agreement they were never invited to and in fact one that they broke centuries ago when they “came to dictate the terms [of] sharing land and resources” (Jacobs & Lytwyn, 2020, p. 199). Since 1796, settler governments have been enacting treaties where they have dictated the terms. Although there is a history of wampum agreements, for example the Two Row Wampum which represented peace, friendship and respect between Indigenous Nations and historical settler governments, the question remains: When was the last time a settler government attended a council fire to *polish the chain*<sup>3</sup> – a ceremonial gathering where they would reconstitute these wampum belt agreements?

Many settlers have no knowledge of these histories and practices and need to take time to educate themselves before proffering land acknowledgements in public. Scott Kouri (2020) admits “that settlers, including myself, are not guests or visitors on these territories but have illegally and violently made a home on Indigenous land” (p. 57). With respect to land acknowledgements, this act of self-location would be a good and honest place to start instead of “read[ing] and repeat[ing] prescriptive acknowledgement without variance [that] runs counter to the foundational values of acknowledgement” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 21) and ends up

<sup>2</sup> The Assembly of First Nations (2021) describes the complex wampum agreements between different Indigenous Nations that were established long before contact.

<sup>3</sup> In the video *Polishing the Chain: Treaty Relations in Toronto* (2021), museum director Rick Hill, citizen of the Tuscarora Nation, residing on the Grand River Territory of the Six Nations, and Anishinaabe historian Alan Corbiere from M’Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island (2021), speak to the importance of wampum agreements requiring ritual meetings where these covenant agreements are acknowledged and spoken to in ways that honor the original agreements.

“erasing colonial violence and Indigenous presence, appropriating Indigenous culture, and refashioning histories of Indigenous habitation” (Jacobs & Lytwyn, 2020 p. 197). Wark (2021) provides an example to illustrate how this occurs when he shares the following account:

The Toronto District School Board [TDSB] faced considerable resistance to their recognition of the Métis people as traditional peoples in their land acknowledgement statement. Métis historian Thistle (2016) argued that, while the Métis did have a historical presence in the Toronto area, they were not traditional inhabitants of the territory. To support his argument, he used historical documents and the understanding that Métis nationhood was based on having a distinctive language, culture, and territory, rather than mixed ancestry. Thistle recognized that Métis claims to territory were harmful to the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples who were fighting for recognition of their land. (p. 198).

Giidaakunadaad furthers this critique when she explains how institutionalized Land Acknowledgements conflate historical understanding by becoming an exercise in equity and inclusion. She elaborates, “I get confused. I hear people acknowledge all kinds of people in these land acknowledgements... [she stresses] without reference to a period of time or even relationships” (personal communication, March 30, 2022). Giidaakunadaad also highlights the huge gaps in knowledge when settlers who recite land acknowledgements cannot even connect the Mississaugas of the New Credit to the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg and the larger Anishinaabe Nation. She goes on to say:

If they understood our law, they would know this is not about land ownership. This is about Anishinaabe *Inaakonigewin* and fundamentally this means that my grandchildren, our grandchildren, all the grandchildren, are to receive the basic life sources in pristine condition...We never relinquished our rightful inheritance or our grand-children’s entitlements. We need to have unfettered access to our inheritance. That’s self-determination (personal communication, March 30, 2022).

Instead, what is centred in institutional land acknowledgements is a *rewriting of history*:

Current land acknowledgements are devoid of the spiritual understandings of land that are the foundations of many Indigenous protocols (Smoke, 2019)... These factually incorrect acknowledgements cause confusion and undermine Indigenous land reclamation efforts (Thistle, 2016; Voth & Loyer (2020), as cited in Wark, 2021, p.198).

## ***Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen: Gratitude the Haudenosaunee Way***

### ***A Living Practice***

The Thanksgiving Address is many things for many Haudenosaunee people. It is a “directive,” a “summation,” a “prayer,” an “address,” an “opening,” an “offering,” a “greeting,” *Ganonhanyonh* (the words before all else), and much much more (*Skä•noñh* Great Law of Peace Center, 2016). It is traditionally spoken to greet the day, start a meeting, or before starting negotiations with other Nations. It can be “abbreviated, or long and loving” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 110), and there is no wrong way to deliver it (Porter, 2008, p. 9) because it is an offering that comes from the heart of the individual who shares it. Tom Porter (2008), Mohawk scholar, Elder, and spiritual leader from Akwesasne, currently residing in Kanatsiohareke, describes the *action* of the address as “put[ting] our thankfulness one layer after another layer” and then “pick[ing] it up and... carry[ing] it with us” (p. 12). The Thanksgiving Address, in simple and yet profound terms, is the *living* practice of thanksgiving *every day* and giving thanks is part of the original instructions given by the Creator for the Haudenosaunee people. As previously stated, this practice of gratitude has been made public. According to Kaliwahe (2022), “the sharing of gratitude with all human beings at this time is also the *responsibility* of the Haudenosaunee people” (personal communication, December 30). The following is an example of a written Thanksgiving Address that has been offered by the Tyendinaga people of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte (2019):

*Everyone (the group) listen well for a short time.  
I will give thanks to the Creator for the things that go about on the earth.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks to the people.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks to our mother the earth.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks to the waters.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks to the fish.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for the roots.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for the grasses.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks to the medicines.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks to the bugs.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks to the sustenance foods.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for the fruit.*

*Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for the animals.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for the trees.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for the birds.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for the four winds.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for our elder brother the sun.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for our grandmother moon.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for the stars.  
Now our minds are one.  
We will make our minds one and give thanks for our Creator for the good things  
we will continue to think peacefully about.  
Now I have done all I can do, if there is anything I have forgotten,  
it's up to you to fix it.  
That is all.*

On the surface, the Thanksgiving Address is an offering of gratitude to the natural world which itself is a beautiful and impactful practice. Greetings and thanks are extended to people, earth, waters, fish, plants, animals, birds, bushes, trees, winds, sun, moon, stars, and Creator. When a Thanksgiving Address is offered, the unity that is possible between human beings is also emphasized through the coming together as ‘one mind.’ Other ways that ‘one mind’ is expressed include but are not limited to: “so be it our minds” (Mohawk, 2008); “and our mind is agreed” (Porter, 2008, pp. 8-26); “now our minds are one” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 110), and ‘one mind’ (Kaliwahe, 2017, para. 1). Kaliwahe (2017) highlights the importance of this unity amongst the Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga, Seneca, and eventually the Tuscarora nations as expressed through the concept of ‘one mind’ in the Thanksgiving Address when he states:

The history of Thanksgiving goes back to when we could achieve ‘one mind’ before going forward in any agreement. There is no date given as to when it was birthed, but ‘one mind’ is referenced in our Constitution, and many studies conclude that Iroquois Confederation took place in the 1140’s AD... so it is certainly old (para. 1).

Each and every time the Thanksgiving Address is shared, and after each aspect of the living world is acknowledged, the speaker states: “now our minds are one,” and listeners offer their affirmation aloud through expressions like *tho*, *hub*, *yes*, *yeah*, and *uh-hub* (Porter, 2008, p. 11) thus recognizing



the interconnectedness of the living world. This call and response strengthens the coming together of minds through the active participation from all in attendance. This participant response is not clearly illustrated in the available public resources, but is an essential aspect for Haudenosaunee gatherings as it delves into deeper layers of Indigenous Knowledge and practice.

### ***Origins and Historical Contexts***

According to Kanonhsyonne Janice C. Hill, Mohawk Turtle clan from Kenhtè:ke, and Associate Vice-Principal at Queen's University, the Thanksgiving Address is

part of the original instructions [that] embrace our oral traditions passed down by our ancestors... received from the Creator [and] revolve around our duty and responsibility to respect and live in harmony with everything that has been provided for our use in the natural world here on Mother Earth (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 22).

Expanding upon the traditions that are passed on through the address, Susan M. Hill (2017), Wolf clan Mohawk scholar of Ohswe:ken (Grand River Territory), states that the 4 major elements of Haudenosaunee thought and philosophy are the "Creation Story, the *Kayeri Niyorihwa:ke* (Four Ceremonies), the *Kaianere'kó:wa* (Great Law of Peace), and the *Karihwiyo* (Good Message of Handsome Lake) which are all represented through the *Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen* (p. 15) signaling to the significance and scope of giving thanks in Haudenosaunee communities.

There was a time when unity among the Six Nations was a lengthy process because there had been so much strife. In response, Creator sent the Great Peacemaker who was able to support the nations in achieving 'one mind' which was essential for the emergence of unity through the Great Law of Peace. This Great Law of Peace remains an important aspect of the Confederacy to this day (Porter, 2008, pp. 273-312). For the Six Nations, the process of becoming 'one mind' is integral to the Thanksgiving Address, and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. In this way, the activation of becoming 'one mind' is a reminder of the agreements made because it reaffirms the Great Law of Peace and the Iroquois Constitution. Every time the Thanksgiving Address is spoken, the *living* aspect of the constitution is affirmed. It is "what we say before we do anything important" (Porter, 2008, p. 10), and by bringing minds together, serves to reaffirm what was created so long ago.

In more recent times, the Thanksgiving Address has been the focus of creating connections across divides and supporting Indigenous knowledge learning for Haudenosaunee youth. In the 1980s, Elders in Oneida Nation of the Thames, including the late Demus Elm and Venus Walker, observed that the connection between the Elders and youth was not strong, so they

suggested that a "Thanksgiving" be made into written form to serve a variety of purposes. The Chiefs at the time like[d] this idea and encouraged the few younger [language] speakers to go out and learn about Thanksgiving (Kaliwahe, 2017, para. 4).

According to Kaliwahe (2023), Ray John Sr. was assigned to visit 13 other Haudenosaunee communities to research their Thanksgiving Address (personal communication, 28 January 2023). In 1988, he returned to Oneida of the Thames and shared his findings with his community. After his findings were put in writing and approved by Chiefs, written Thanksgiving Addresses began to appear in many Haudenosaunee communities (Kaliwahe, personal communication, 28 January 2023). The re-emergence of the Thanksgiving Address “brought a much-needed starting point for all conversations cultural and its manifestation in written form ensured literacy” (Kaliwahe, personal communication, January 28, 2023). Since then, the Address has been shared with many peoples across the globe and translated into many languages.

### **Indigenous Knowledge Education**

Greeting and giving thanks to the natural world for the ways that it supports life on Earth is a common global practice amongst many Indigenous peoples. Porter (2008) suggests that many pre-colonial societies also lived in relationship with land, and engaged in reciprocal relationships with all aspects of the natural world where thanks was offered. He states that giving thanks

is the spiritual key of the ceremonial world of the Iroquois: the Mohawk, and the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, the Seneca, and the Tuscarora. And I would even dare to say further than that, of all the nations in North America and South America. If you want to step back a couple of thousand years, it is probably the same words that the Irish had one time. Africa has some of it yet. All the world's people used to have it. They call it the universal truth. *That's* what we have to get back to (pp. 25-26).

As we can see, centering gratitude through the Thanksgiving Address reignites an ontological worldview that has been lost for many.

Although each Thanksgiving Address is different and may contain all, less, or more of the living world than what is expressed above, the common threads between them include kinship with the natural world and an interconnectedness that focuses on land. The Thanksgiving Address then, activates orientations to gratitude and land that are central to Indigenous resurgence and decolonization (Mojica, 2012). Giving thanks is a practice that counters settler-colonial logics rooted in what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer and scholar, refers to as a “hyperindividualism that negates relationality” (Simpson, 2017, p. 154) and supports human beings and land.

Activating a relational land-based practice like the Thanksgiving Address engenders a relational attunement to the natural world that is life-affirming and challenges settler colonial logics rooted in erasure, extraction, elimination, and ‘recursive dispossession’ (Nichols (2019) as cited in Maynard & Simpson, 2022, pp. 140-141). As Kimmerer (2013) states:

while expressing gratitude seems innocent enough, it is a revolutionary idea. In a consumer society, contentment is a radical proposition. Recognizing abundance rather than scarcity undermines an economy that thrives by creating unmet desires (p. 111).

This Indigenous practice of gratitude is a challenge to colonial education systems, practices, and worldviews and can lead to change within the lives of individuals and perhaps a change in systems and institutions over time. The sharing of the Thanksgiving Address is an act of generosity that brings forth a whole lot of hope and invites us to share Indigenous knowledge and practice that can contribute to possibilities that centre Indigenous futurity. It is also an Indigenous foundational practice centering Indigenous knowledge that inherently circumvents and resists settler colonial logics of consumerism, capitalism, and greed.

Planting the seeds that foster gratitude through the activation of the Thanksgiving Address provides opportunities to connect with Indigenous knowledge that is “*practical* knowledge for survival, not some mystical training for transcendence” (Nelson, 2008, p. 13). In addition to the original instructions, through the address, land-centred teachings of reciprocity, interdependence, abundance, leadership, remembrance, generosity, responsibility, humility, and care abound (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 103-117). This Indigenous Knowledge education and practice encourages embodied knowledge of the universal truth for minds to come to in their own way. The learning that arises from and through the Thanksgiving Address includes principles of respect, reciprocity, choice, and cooperation that can engender relationship to land and place and in turn, cultivates a foundation for Indigenous education and practice, changing what and how we learn so that relational contexts can begin to change (Simpson, 2017, p. 151).

The Thanksgiving address also emphasizes shared Indigenous teachings that speak to spirituality, place, relationality, and reciprocity (Anderson et al., 2017 as cited in Wemigwans, 2018, p. 8) that affirm the interconnectedness of all living beings. While it is always important to recognize that Indigenous knowledge ontologies and practices are diverse and vary from nation to nation, place is an integral aspect of life for most. It is in the air that is breathed, the water that is ingested, and the ground that is walked upon. Relationality is the way respect to that place is lived and extends to and includes all life that exists in that place. Reciprocity is shown through actions expressed through gratitude and kindness to all life and spirituality illuminates the truths that are learned. Please be mindful that this elaboration of the underlying principles of the Thanksgiving Address is brief and offered with great humility; it does not do justice to the profound teachings that are connected to these foundations.

### **The Politics of Reconciliation**

Opportunities to do the right thing have been consistently thwarted through incompetence and an unwillingness to find the political will to create positive change in this country. Part 10 of the *Reconciliation as Relationship* framework from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2015) states:

Reconciliation requires sustained public education and dialogue, including youth engagement, about the history and legacy of residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal rights, as well as the historical and contemporary contributions of Aboriginal peoples to Canadian society (p.161).

Within most institutions, reconciliation often negates truth and does not address the miseducation so rampant in this society nor the contributions of Indigenous peoples in the past and present. More often than not, reconciliation stops at the history of residential schools, disregards original wampum agreements and colonial treaty agreements, and often co-opts Indigenous knowledge and practices. We agree with Wark (2021) when he states:

in their current form, land acknowledgements appear to be firmly embedded in reconciliation politics (Asher et al., 2018; CAUT, 2019; Daigle, 2019; Janzen, 2019; Marche, 2017; Shahzad, 2017), often citing ambiguous purposes like demonstrating respect for Indigenous peoples (CAUT, 2019; Fitzsimmons Frey, 2018; Janzen, 2019) or support for reconciliation (Asher et al., 2018). This shift has seen these practices being increasingly criticized for devolving into box-ticking exercises, strictly symbolic gestures and moves to settler innocence. They have also been accused of being lacking in critical thought regarding their purposes and as attempts to rewrite Indigenous and settler colonial history” (p. 195).

This co-opted practice has become a reconciliation bypass<sup>4</sup> that centres settler preoccupations with getting it ‘right.’ Without an understanding of the Indigenous *knowledge* that supports land acknowledgements, they will continue to remain “utterances or actions that benefit a performer but fail to produce, or even contribute to, meaningful effects” (Blair, 2021, p. 54), in other words, performative. Developing new practices of pedagogy and solidarity is sorely needed. Learning about treaties and wampum agreements, Indigenous nations on whose land we live, and being honest about positionality/one’s location (Kovach, 2021), is a first step to breaking away from settler performativity.

Engaging with the Thanksgiving Address can take up the *empty gestures* of institutional land acknowledgements and the politics of reconciliation that have become “the performance of an utterance that is disingenuous or will have limited meaningful effects” (Blair, 2021, p. 54). However, when thinking of foundational values of acknowledgement, it could be argued that those values relate to the time immemorial Indigenous practice of gratitude, giving thanks and interconnectedness. And yet, like the land acknowledgement, the Thanksgiving Address also needs to be carefully scaffolded so that learners connect to the core teachings and meanings, so it

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of ‘reconciliation bypass’ has been adapted from the concept of the spiritual bypass coined by Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist John Welwood (2011). A ‘reconciliation bypass’ is a common practice amongst settlers and governments in this country when truth is overlooked and often suppressed resulting in performative acts of reconciliation that lack accountability.

is not reduced to a hollow performance. Learning to activate and engage with the relationality of the Thanksgiving Address can support the core values of Land Acknowledgments as seen at JICS.

### **The Jackman Institute for Child Study (JICS)—A Lab School**

JICS is a research institute and laboratory school at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. It is a self-funded, inquiry-based nursery to grade 6 school where

children work collaboratively to construct knowledge and to contribute their understanding to the class community. The school contributes on many levels to the academic work of the University by linking educational theory and practice for the benefit of teachers, researchers, educational policy makers, professional visitors, and in-service teachers (JICS, 2022).

Educators at JICS are engaged in innovative inquiry-based education practices that support the whole child. For the dedicated teachers at JICS, professional development is integral to their practice. Between 2012 and 2016 staff met weekly to learn about Indigenous education, history, perspectives, and knowledge. For many of the faculty, this knowledge was a new area of study, and many continue to engage with and learn from Indigenous knowledge. In 2012, Dr. Jennifer Wemigwans began to work informally with JICS when her child was admitted to their nursery school. Over the years, Wemigwans developed relationships with educators Ben Peebles (grade 4, 5 and 6 teacher for 16 years) and Krista Spence (teacher-librarian off and on for 14 years). On November 4, 2022, we had the pleasure of speaking with Peebles and Spence at JICS where they shared their experiences of engaging with Indigenous education at JICS, with a particular focus on land acknowledgements and the Thanksgiving Address. It is important to note that working with land acknowledgement education was formally introduced to students at all levels, whereas the practice of giving thanks and engagement with the Thanksgiving Address emerged over time and evolved into a formal practice during 2020-2021.



A grade six student from the Jackman Institute for Child Studies who was encouraged by Krista Spence “to think about what specific plants we might be grateful for, [and] what plants we might have a connection to. (Photo by Krista Spence)

### ***Teaching and Learning from Indigenous Education through Land Acknowledgements***

The re-education of faculty and staff at JICS began long before land acknowledgements were implemented by the University of Toronto. In 2012, land acknowledgements were formally introduced at JICS. In our conversation, Spence and Peebles recalled the different responses and insights shared from older and younger students when they began to “unpack” land acknowledgments. What was apparent was that scaffolding Indigenous knowledge was essential if students were to engage meaningfully with this education. They learned that younger students gravitate more towards gratitude where, with proper support and time, older students could process and trouble the realities of settler colonialism.

Spence further shared her experiences working with younger and older students, recalling that the younger grades recognized names like Haudenosaunee from land acknowledgements, but that they could not grasp context or significance. She said, “it really did help for them to learn the names of Nations, but they did not really understand what else was happening there.” She went on to share that when she asked the grade two and four students what they thought should be included in a land acknowledgment, “they talked about the stones and the rocks, the water and they were more about the land. So, it was interesting that for them, that concrete element [land] was what they were thinking about in terms of a Land Acknowledgement.” In contrast, when Spence worked with grade 6 students, she said they revealed that “they didn’t really like the Land Acknowledgement [because]...it’s always the same thing.” She explained that there were many mixed feelings about “what it means,” although students were able to recognize its significance. As they began to unpack land acknowledgments, one non-Indigenous student expressed their understanding when they said “This is your land. And now we took it” while another student made connections and comparisons: “It’s like someone coming and sleeping on your couch. And then saying thanks for your couch and taking it.” Recognizing both the remarkable insight of the students and, at the same time, the challenges they were facing, Spence worked with the feedback she received and adapted to the unique needs of each age group.

For the older students, Spence began by introducing them to land acknowledgements from colleges, universities, and boards of education. They studied what would be helpful, and what was not. Spence shared that the grade sixes realized that

they would like to have a Land Acknowledgement that changes, so that people can learn different things [and they wanted] something that was more guided. [They suggested that] maybe there’s one for all older kids and one for younger kids.

She shared that over time, students “ended up writing out one for the graduation and they really thought about what they wanted.” Peebles explained that the heavy work that Spence did with the grade sixes was important because they were the graduating class of June 2019. The new grade six class coming in for the 2019-2020 school year would have picked up that work in their final year, as there were plans to write a new land acknowledgment for the school. However, the COVID pandemic hit, and all learning became virtual. People were in crisis mode, and the first year of navigating teaching online remotely was challenging for everyone. Peebles recalled

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that when the students eventually returned to class, a lot changed and the comprehensive and supportive work with land acknowledgments that occurred with the Class of 2019, did not happen with the Class of 2020. The returning grade sixes and teachers were impacted by a very awkward arrangement of having the cohort of 24 students split into halves. He said:

I would work with one half of my students all morning and the other half all afternoon. And this was in an effort to minimize contact between kids...all our assemblies were online, with everyone sitting around one screen, and then you know, I'll admit that we continued to use the Land Acknowledgement that had been written in previous years, but without bringing that meaningful work into it again.

Once classes resumed in person at JICS, land acknowledgments also continued. However, during the first in-person assembly, Peebles said the grade six decision to offer a land acknowledgement was approached as, "sort of an opportunity to talk in front of the group" but without "the understanding of the deep politics and meaning and history and everything that is embedded into those words." Peebles said that "they all had some experience doing it. But so, you know, that was becoming a pattern" and no longer meaningful. It was at that time that Wemigwans' son, who was in the grade six cohort expressed dismay and frustration with his peers uttering words that they clearly did not understand. Peebles recalled Wemigwans reaching out to him and how they discussed that if the children were going to be doing this, "that it might be more appropriate that they connect to the Thanksgiving Address, which is about the land, about nature, and about what we're thankful for." Peebles elaborated: "I don't think the message was like, don't do Land Acknowledgement anymore. But more like, that's something that takes the thought and knowledge and understanding of history and politics." The outcome of this conversation was the formal introduction of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address at JICS.

### ***Teaching and Learning from Gratitude and the Thanksgiving Address***

At the heart of this process was the influence of Indigenous educators and Knowledge Keepers, who brought gratitude and giving thanks into their work at JICS and the attunement of staff to the teachings and their students. This, combined with staff training and the insightful feedback shared by students giving thanks, allowed the Thanksgiving Address to become integral to the JICS community. Spence relayed the experience of Indigenous visitors like Anishinaabe writer, editor, and activist Niigaan Sinclair to the school: "He spoke here, and he talked about a Land Acknowledgement, and saying thank you to the animals and saying hello to your relatives.... saying hello to the plants and animals and things like that."

Peebles also recalled the many visits they had with Anishinaabe storyteller and traditional knowledge holder Isaac Murdoch: "I don't think he ever used the words Thanksgiving Address or anything like that...but I very strongly remember a big message that he gave to the kids

about being thankful, cognizant, giving recognition to aspects of the land that we may not think about all the time...talking a lot about water, the animals that depend upon the water.”

They mentioned other Indigenous visitors from diverse Nations and how they all opened with a version of giving thanks. At first, the teachers could not specify what the practice was, but it became evident that gatherings with Indigenous visitors often began with this practice of giving thanks. And so, giving thanks became integral to the JICS community.

During the pandemic, JICS, like many schools, had to vacillate between online and in-person classes. Together, Peebles and Spence turned to Corneau’s *Strong Stories Kanyen’keha:ka* (2016), to create a truly lovely recording of the children reciting the Thanksgiving Address. After this, Peebles notes that the Thanksgiving Address became more of the student’s contribution to assemblies and that an adult would then give a land acknowledgement. Peebles also suggested that when staff did do a land acknowledgement

it became kind of a more personal thing for the person who was saying it, so that, whoever it was, and sometimes it was Krista, sometimes Richard [school principal], would make more personal connections to the land, as they saw it from their perspective.

Beyond assemblies and gatherings, giving thanks also became an integral aspect of JICS. Spence shared how scaffolding the Thanksgiving Address with the work they were doing outdoors revealed the interconnectedness of all life. Through this process, they were able to consider the role of distinct aspects of nature, and how everything gets noticed and cared for. For her, this work aligned with

the Thanksgiving Address and understanding how grateful we are for things and how everything is connected. And so, I would say that’s the scaffolding that’s happening. And it’s partly done by the world, and then partly from us pointing it out. But then they have more understanding of the things that crawl because we’re finding them - the slugs and everything like that. So, I think that that is kind of the scaffolding work that we are doing, which is outside on the land.

Speaking less to the scaffolding of knowledge and more to the teacher’s preparation for working with the Thanksgiving Address, Spence also shared that she watched a series of sessions on *Polishing the Chain: Treaty Relations in Toronto* (Hill & Corbiere, 2021). She explained what was meant by the euphemism, polishing the chain when she stated:

[it’s] that sense of making agreements and coming back every year to kind of reconnect and strengthen the relationship. I’ve used that with the students too. And I think that’s really important as a way of understanding how to



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proceed with things. It's not just one direction that you go but a rechecking and building of relationships and things like that.

In thinking about how the Thanksgiving Address evolved in the school, Spence also shared how the Principal, Richard Messina, was very inspired by the chapter in Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* that specifically discusses the Thanksgiving Address. As part of staff professional development, the faculty were asked to read the book over the summer and use it as an inspiration at the beginning of staff meetings. Krista remembers, "One week somebody would have a mindfulness moment...So that was, I think another way that [gratitude] was kind of brought into our minds and our consciousness."

### **Land-based Pedagogies: Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Resurgence at Jackman Institute for Child Study**

Much of what Spence and Peebles shared is an example of how to unsettle the havoc of institutionalized land acknowledgements through a relational land-based education practice. At JICS, land acknowledgements provided meaningful opportunities for learning about colonial history, state treaties, stolen lands, and contemporary structural realities. Over time, giving thanks for the natural world became an expansive practice rooted in Indigenous land ontologies that centre relationality.

When the Thanksgiving Address was introduced, it provided opportunities for students to learn about a specific Indigenous knowledge teaching and practice that engages with embodied learning about Indigenous values and principles that is particular to their local context. Through this example, it is evident that when time invested in the political work of unpacking settler colonialism, land acknowledgements can actually mean something within institutions. The experience at JICS also demonstrates that the Thanksgiving Address and the practice of giving thanks is a more appropriate way to begin a gathering when anti-colonial work has not been done and when younger children are involved in learning.

The keen perception of the grade 6 class that Spence worked with in 2018-2019 illuminates the hypocrisy of land acknowledgements that is rampant within our contemporary society. Their realization that there should be a different land acknowledgement for older students and younger students is critical and profound. The fact that these young people also wanted land acknowledgements to change, speaks to context and relationships, and is deeply insightful, and resonates with Indigenous practices of Land Acknowledgements. The challenges with the Class of 2020 also mirror the challenges with institutional land acknowledgments when time, care and meaningful engagement are not activated. Looking at how younger students responded to land acknowledgements, it is not surprising that they gravitated to the natural world because they have yet to be corrupted by the "hyper-individualism that negates [the] relationality" (Simpson, 2017, p. 154) of nature and instead remain attuned to it. Teaching young children the Thanksgiving Address and how to express gratitude, is not only an age-appropriate teaching but a foundational value of Indigenous knowledge education that supports Indigenous land-based education.

## Conclusion

Working with the Thanksgiving Address in schools is an authentic practice that can initiate a land-based reconciliation that begins to foster the re-emergence of the original relationship: human being with Mother Earth. Cultivating the emergence and remembrance of the original relationship and the interconnectedness of all living beings is an age-appropriate intervention for elementary school children and creates the possibility for the resurgence of Indigenous Knowledges. The work of students and educators at JICS is an example of how the empty gestures of performative allyship (Blair, 2021, p. 54) can be unsettled within institutions. Across the country, education systems at all levels have been specifically tasked to provide Indigenous Education as identified in the TRC's Calls to Action #62-64 (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, pp. 179-180). Although some settler educators have shown reluctance, and governments have greatly interfered with this process<sup>5</sup>, there are Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators committed to bringing Indigenous knowledge and practice into education systems. The inherent knowledge of the Thanksgiving Address activated by the respectful and collaborative approach of educators working with it at JICS demonstrate that with careful scaffolding and age-appropriate instruction, children can begin to learn important Indigenous foundational teachings. When instruction is properly guided and rooted in an ethic of care, students can provide public land acknowledgements that unpack settler colonialism in this broader perspective.

Giidaakunadaad asked, "How can we do things differently?" (personal communication, March 30, 2022). This question is key for educators and learners. Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy provide a way of being and learning about the world where the notion of truth relates to the ways in which we are all interconnected. It is that energy of the sky world, the rotation of the planet, the air we breathe, that brings us into a higher understanding, where truth, from an Indigenous perspective, leads us into the circle of natural laws. She explained:

We understood things from up here. We have to grow our people back into that. We've got lots of work to do. And we've got to get it into our children, and we've got to get it into our grandchildren. And then we are going to see something different - in the future generations (personal communication, March 30, 2022).

While Giidaakunadaad is specifically referring to Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee children, her direction relates to what is possible for all children. Coalition building and solidarity are not easy prospects. Peebles echoes this when he speaks to how land acknowledgments and other practices are often approached:

I think where we get stuck is when we don't think about these questions, when we don't continue the conversation, when we just sort of start to do something

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<sup>5</sup> Here we are referring to Premier Doug Ford's cancellation of the curriculum rewrite in 2018, (Crawley, 2018).

as a thing to do and we stop doing the work of understanding it deeply and constantly you know, working with it. (personal communication, November 4, 2022)

This notion of doing the work and continuing the conversation is created through authentic relationship building and the commitment to address settler colonial school curriculums. Attempting to engage in reconciliation with uninformed and made-up land acknowledgements not only results in misunderstanding but is a dangerous erasure of Indigenous Nations, knowledge systems, and lands. Land acknowledgements require a deep commitment to educating oneself in land-based practices that trouble the history of settler colonialism and speak to the ways that history has created the colonial structures and realities that we live with today. Centering Indigenous knowledge teachings, like the Haudenosaunee *Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen* (Thanksgiving Address), offers a framework in which land-based education supports Indigenous resurgence and possibilities for reconciliation in the future. By creating space that respects the self-determination, sovereignty and pedagogies of diverse Indigenous peoples, settlers can begin to “find new ways of relating to Indigenous people and to one another” (Kouri, 2020, p. 61).

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