

# Words that Come Before All Else: An Embodied Decolonizing Praxis

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## Abstract

In this article, we consider the communal practice of reading the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address: *Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen* as an entry point into anti-racism work in nursing education. We describe how this practice, inspired by Kimmerer's (2013) *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teaching of plants*, creates brave and generative spaces for students and educators to engage in difficult conversations about settler colonial violence and its ongoing impacts on Indigenous Peoples. We consider a broad theoretical overview of the history and practice of the Thanksgiving Address and how as a decolonizing practice, it works to counter the colonial logics that often dominate western academic institutions. The intentional and embodied practice teaches us about our kinship responsibilities, moves us toward a renewed relationship with the human and more-than-human world, cultivates gratitude, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging, and prepares us to engage in anti-racism work.

**Keywords:** Anti-racism; Thanksgiving Address; Indigenous ways of knowing; decolonizing practices

As Indigenous and settler scholars working in nursing education in Canada, we regularly facilitate workshops and teach classes about settler colonial violence and its ongoing impacts on Indigenous Peoples. While much guidance exists on what to teach, gaps remain in the literature about *how* to create generative and brave spaces for a group or classroom of students to engage in anti-racist dialogue and practices. In this article, we share our practice of reading the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address: *Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen* as described in Potawatomi scholar Kimmerer's (2013) book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*. We share how we read from her book at the beginning of each gathering and the ways

it prepares students (and ourselves) to enter difficult conversations and engage brave practices in a good way. We consider how this decolonizing practice is grounded in the existing literature and how it provides a meaningful way to enact Indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing, and connecting.

We come to this work as colleagues, co-conspirators, and kin. Heather is a settler scholar of Scottish and German heritage, and a nurse educator. Born and raised in Moh'kins'tsis or Calgary, Heather completed her nursing education at the University of Calgary where she now teaches. During the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's gatherings to bear witness to Indigenous Peoples' experiences in Indian Residential School (IRS), she learned of

her grandparents' participation in the Port Alberni IRS. This revelation sparked a journey of truth-seeking, transformation, and responsibility. In 2017, Heather joined the University of Calgary as the Faculty of Nursing's inaugural director of Indigenous initiatives. She later transitioned to an assistant dean position overseeing the development of the Faculty's rural and Indigenous nursing route. Michelle is a Mi'kmaw and Irish/English scholar and educator. Michelle's ancestral home is Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland), where both her paternal, Mi'kmaw side (Paul), and maternal, Irish/English side (Roberts) were born and raised until the lack of opportunities in the late 1960s brought her parents to Tkaronto (Toronto), where she grew up. Michelle has called Moh'kins'tsis home for the past 25 years. She has been on her reclamation journey as a Mi'kmaw woman displaced from her home community and going 'home' to repair and renew her relationships with family, with the Land, language, and ceremony for over a decade. Michelle joined the nursing faculty in February 2023 as the first associate dean, Indigenous education. Heather and Michelle met in 2017 at an Elder-led gathering, completed their doctoral work in a close-knit cohort, and Heather recruited Michelle to join the Faculty of Nursing where they now work together to effect change in the faculty and disrupt colonial violence and foreground Indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing, and connecting.

The Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address is an ancient and ongoing oral practice taken up at the beginning and end of gatherings to honour and show gratitude to all of creation. First introduced to us in Kimmerer's chapter, *Allegiance to Gratitude*, we read how Haudenosaunee Faithkeeper Oren Lyons invited all people to take up the Address. As he told Kimmerer, who worried about cultural appropriation, "Of course you should write about it. It's supposed to be shared, otherwise how can it work? We've been waiting five hundred years for people to listen. If they'd understood the Thanksgiving then, we wouldn't be in this mess" (2013, p. 116). Overcoming our

fear of taking up a practice inappropriately, we began passing Kimmerer's book around our opening talking circles and watched the effects on our group. This ancient medicine does its work and prepares us to enter meaningful conversations about difficult topics in a good way. It is a shared oral practice of gratitude and reciprocity that helps us to unlearn the ways of colonialism and learn to live by a different ethic where everyone, human and more-than-human, has value and belongs.

This oral practice of the Thanksgiving Address centers our relationships to Land<sup>1</sup> and counters the settler colonial logics that built Canada on the erasure of Indigenous Peoples, the occupation of Indigenous Land, and the enslavement of Black Peoples through chattel slavery (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Within settler colonialism, Land was related to as property and people as resources to be exploited for the benefit of settler survivance which contrasted to an Indigenous understanding of Land as animate and people as kin (Donald, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The colonial logics that racialized Indigenous Peoples and Black Peoples ensured the ascendancy of white settlers as the true and rightful owners and occupiers of the Land. In this system, white settlers were not immigrants who lived under and respected Indigenous laws and epistemologies, which would have required responsibilities to Land and people. Rather, white settlers erased and replaced Indigenous Peoples, becoming native to the Land they occupied and othering non-white people (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Settler colonialism is a structure and a logic that continues to uphold white dominance in Canadian society and is characterized by historical and ongoing violence, oppression, and racism against Indigenous Peoples and Black Peoples enacted through systems of power and privilege (Wolfe, 2006). The outworking of white dominance is seen in institutions, policies, and systems. As nurse educators teaching about racism and settler colonialism, we uncover these hidden colonial logics that influence the world around us, however, we also seek to offer a new way forward, one that is lifegiving and honouring of

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<sup>1</sup> We capitalize Land as a political move as we recognize Land as a sentient being (Styres, 2019).

the human and more-than-human world we inhabit.

### **Answering the Call to Action and Transforming Ways of Knowing**

Within this colonial system, Indigenous Peoples have experienced violent cultural control and forced assimilation through education, health, legal, and governance systems. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) released its Final Report and 94 Calls to Action specific to sectors of society complicit in the harms done to Indigenous Peoples through the Indian Residential School System and colonization.

Call to Action #24: We call upon medical and nursing schools in Canada to require all students to take a course dealing with Aboriginal health issues, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, and Indigenous teachings and practices. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism. (2015, p. 3)

In 2017, the University of Calgary introduced the *ii'taa'poh'to'p* (*a place to rejuvenate and re-energize during a journey*), *Together in a good way: A journey of transformation and renewal Indigenous Strategy* following community listening circles and Elder engagement from local Indigenous communities. As a living document, we align with and enliven *ii'taa'poh'to'p* through our Thanksgiving Address practice and decolonizing curricula, and by privileging Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.

### **The Thanksgiving Address as a Practice**

The Thanksgiving Address is a gratitude practice that centers relationality, interconnectedness, and active participation with the refrain, “now our minds are one” at the end of each stanza. The practice that we have taken up incorporates the sections that Kimmerer (2013) included in the chapter, *Allegiance to Gratitude*. Much like Kimmerer’s version within her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, we intersperse

the excerpts of the Address throughout this commentary using italics to highlight the text. In the first stanza we read:

*Today we have gathered and when we look upon the faces around us we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now let us bring our minds together as one as we give greetings and thanks to each other as People. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 107)

### **Now Our Minds Are One**

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy (2025) are known for their skilled diplomacy, having negotiated their survival over centuries of colonization. Their success depended on their ability to engage in both conflict and diplomacy as a united force against other First Nations and colonizing nations (Belshaw, 2015). It was common practice for the council of the Haudenosaunee Five Nations League to seek unanimity among its leaders rather than majority rule, thus avoiding the harm caused by internal conflict. Whether the Haudenosaunee chose to engage in war or make treaty, they found common ground from which to advance their cause. The Thanksgiving Address was a communal practice that moved the participants toward agreement by a methodical review of the natural world, ending each stanza with the repeated refrain of “and now our minds are one” (Kimmerer, 2013). If the Haudenosaunee could agree on their reverence for the created world, of which they were just one part, it was reasoned they could extend their agreement to the any matter at hand.

*We are thankful to our Mother the Earth, for she gives us everything that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she still continues to care for us, just as she has from the beginning of time. To our Mother, we send thanksgiving, love, and respect. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 108)

While the stressors nursing educators face are different than the Haudenosaunee Council who engaged in the Thanksgiving Address as both a consensus building and lifegiving spiritual act that sustained their nations, the practice of corporate thanksgiving brings us inner and corporate peace as well. As nursing educators, whether we enter spaces feeling pressure to perform and not offend, and/or nervous because we know talking about racism and colonization is often difficult; our bodies hold tension. The ritual of reading the Thanksgiving Address slows us down, reminds us of our place in this natural world, and nurtures our souls. As the book is passed around from person to person, we must admit that fears often creep into our minds. “Is this taking too long? Will people think this is a waste of time, after all they came to this session thinking they would engage in dialogue, forum theatre, etc...” But these fears soon pass as the tensions release from our bodies. Time spent collectively embodying the ancient words of thanksgiving to the natural world is not wasted time, but it settles our bodies, minds, and spirits, and brings a sense of unity and common purpose. United by our agreement that the Land, the cosmos, and our other-than-human-kin are indeed important and worthy of praise for fulfilling their duties and providing us life, we can enter our work in a good way.

*We give thanks to all of the waters of the world for quenching our thirst, for providing strength and nurturing life for all beings. We know its power in many forms— waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans, snow and ice. We are grateful that the waters are still here and meeting their responsibility to the rest of Creation. Can we agree that water is important to our lives and bring our minds together as one to send greetings and thanks to the Water? Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 108)

*We turn our thoughts to all of the Fish life in the water. They were instructed to cleanse and purify the water. They also give themselves to us as food. We are grateful that they continue to do their duties and we send to the Fish our*

*greetings and our thanks. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 108-109)

## Relationship Renewal

Papaschase Cree Scholar Dwayne Donald suggests that the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians “are heavily influenced by colonial teachings that emphasize relationship denial” (2021, p. 53). This inherited colonial curriculum creates a malformed, hierarchical understanding of the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world, with man exalted above the natural world (Bensler, 2022). The outworking of these imposed divisions is fractured relationships where humans no longer view each other and the natural world as kin. Rather than recognizing the ways we are connected and thus responsible for each other, this system promotes relationship denial where Indigenous Peoples are viewed as a problem and an obstacle to settler progress.

We find hope for a changed relationship between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians where settlers no longer view Indigenous Peoples as a problem to be solved (Bensler, 2022). Instead, non-Indigenous Canadians might then engage in practices that promote reciprocity, responsibility, restitution, and a right relationship with Indigenous Peoples and the Land (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015). Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice (2018) argued, “relationships are storied, imagined things; they set the scope for our experience of being and belonging” (p. 74). Justice promoted an Indigenous understanding of kinship to guide right relatedness because it upholds obligations to diverse networks of relations and relationships, to the human and more-than-human worlds. Going beyond the Western idea of family, the concept of kinship helps to guide how human societies are structured and how people interact to benefit each other. Building sustainable, healthy relationships requires imagination, curiosity, and empathy. As Mi’kmaw scholar Marie Battiste suggests, “it is not enough to rebel against injustices unless we also rebel against our lack of imagination and caring” (2013, p. 190). Similarly, Donald (2019) reminds us that “stories that give life emerge

from people sitting together in the spirit of good relations and thinking carefully on their shared future as human beings” (p. 121). Through the act of sitting together to recite the Thanksgiving Address, we are invited to transform our understanding of the human and more-than-human world. We begin to see the worlds through the lens of kinship relationality.

*Now we turn toward the vast fields of Plant life. As far as the eye can see, the Plants grow, working many wonders. They sustain many life forms. With our minds gathered together, we give thanks and look forward to seeing Plant life for many generations to come. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 109)

*When we look about us, we see that the berries are still here, providing us with delicious foods. The leader of the berries is the strawberry, the first to ripen in the spring. Can we agree that we are grateful that the berries are with us in the world and send our thanksgiving, love, and respect to the berries? Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p.109)

### **A Much-Needed Disruption**

The Thanksgiving Address is a practice that disrupts the scarcity narrative driven by a consumer culture that teaches us there are not enough resources in this world to meet our needs (Kimmerer, 2013). Unchecked consumerism confuses needs with desire and fosters a culture of fear. As humans, we are dependent on the different elements of the natural world performing their function or duty. The Address reminds us that we live in a world of abundance with everything we need to sustain life. When we live with an attitude of contentment, we can resist fear and live with a sense of freedom and expansiveness. As Onondaga Clan Mother Freda Jacques explains, “each part of Creation is thanked in turn for fulfilling its Creator-given duties to the others” (as cited by Kimmerer, 2013, p. 111). We are sustained by a natural world that compels us to live out our duties and responsibilities with thanksgiving. From this place of gratitude, we are receptive to the experiences and value of the other.

*With one mind, we honour and thank all the Food Plants we harvest from the garden, especially the Three Sisters who feed the people with such abundance. Since the beginning of time, the grains, vegetables, beans, and fruit have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them as well. We gather together in our minds all the plant foods and send them a greeting and thanks. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 109)

*Now we turn to the Medicine Herbs of the world. From the beginning they were instructed to take away sickness. They are always waiting and ready to heal us. We are so happy that they are still among us those special few who remember how to use the plants for healing. With one mind, we send thanksgiving, love, and respect to the Medicines and the keepers of the Medicines. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 109-110)

### **Understanding Our Role**

The Thanksgiving Address teaches a culture of responsibility and duty. As Clan Mother Freida Jacques teaches, at the beginning of time, Creator gave humans the duty to express our thanksgiving (nysmuseum, 2014; 1:40). With the Address, each element of the natural world is named along with its function. This practice of naming and recalling each element’s function and responsibility in the natural world is instructive to us as humans. We are prompted to ask: What is *our* role? What are *our* duties and responsibilities? This becomes particularly prescient when considering our roles in anti-racism and anti-colonial work in nursing education. We invite students and educators to join us in critical reflection on their own unique gifts and abilities and how we might collectively and individually apply them within our spheres of influence. This recitation of the roles and responsibilities of the natural world becomes an inspiration that compels us to action.

*Standing around us we see all the Trees. The Earth has many families of Trees who each have their own instructions and uses. Some provide shelter and*

*shade, others fruit and beauty and many useful gifts. The Maple is the leader of the trees, to recognize its gift of sugar when the People need it most. Many peoples of the world recognize a Tree as a symbol of peace and strength. With one mind we greet and thank the Tree life. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 110)

*We gather our minds together to send our greetings and thanks to all the beautiful animal life of the world, who walk about with us. They have many things to teach us as people. We are grateful that they continue to share their lives with us and hope that it will always be so. Let us put our minds together as one and send our thanks to the Animals. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 111)

The communal act of reading The Thanksgiving Address where everyone partakes, cultivates a sense of belonging and rejects the colonial logics that divide us and deny our responsibilities to each other (Donald, 2009; 2012). Rather than aligning with colonial logics, where people are viewed through a utilitarian lens and judged based on their alignment with the colonial project, the Thanksgiving Address centers the natural world and invites all people to join. No one is left on the outside or asked to be something they are not, but instead the human and more-than-human world are brought together and honoured for their attributes and contributions (Kimmerer, 2013).

*We put our minds together as one and thank all the birds who move and fly above our heads. The Creator gave them the gift of beautiful songs. Each morning they greet the day and with their songs remind us to enjoy and appreciate life. The Eagle was chosen to be their leader and to watch over the world. To all the Birds, from the smallest to the largest, we send out joyful greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 111)

*We are all thankful for the powers we know as the Four Winds. We hear their voices in the moving air as they refresh us and purify the air we breathe. They*

*help to bring the change of seasons. From the four directions they come, bringing us messages and giving us strength. With one mind we send our greetings and thanks to the Four Winds. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 112)

### **Centring Indigenous Ways of Knowing**

The act of reading from Kimmerer's work in academic forums demonstrates to students that Indigenous ways of knowing and relating with the world are valid and important (2013). For Ojibwe scholar Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles, public readings from Kimmerer's work during their graduate school experience countered the message they were often told that Indigenous ways of knowing were not welcome in the academy (Ignace & Smiles, 2024). They recall,

I had to fight to ensure the visibility of Indigenous thought in graduate seminars; it was clearly communicated that there was no room for them among the multitudes of white, European, male thinkers that dominated these spaces. I felt demoralized, I felt alone, and I felt ready to leave the academy and abandon my dreams of being an Indigenous professor. (p. 3)

To Smiles, centring Indigenous voices and practices, particularly those that luminate our relationship with the more-than-human world, created space for Indigenous ways of knowing in institutions where Western ideologies often dominate. Smiles noted that Kimmerer's writings helped them to feel comfortable and confident bringing Indigenous worldviews into their scholarly work. Interior Salish scholar Danielle Ignace found Kimmerer's reference about plants as teachers rather than just subjects to be studied to be a transformative idea. Kimmerer's invitation to be in relationship with plants and to learn from them shifted Ignace's understanding of science.

*Now we turn to the west where our grandfathers the Thunder Beings live. With lightning and thundering voices they bring with them the waters that renews life. We bring our minds together as one to send greetings and*

*thanks to our Grandfathers, the Thunderers.* (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 112-113)

*Now we send greetings and thanks to our eldest brother the Sun. Each day without fail he travels the sky from east to west, bringing the light of a new day. He is the source of all the first of life. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to our Brother, the Sun. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 113)

For both Ignace and Smiles, Kimmerer's work has created a sense of belonging because they could recognize Indigenous worldviews being honoured through her work. They felt encouraged to bring their whole selves to their academic role and not hide their Indigeneity. In our practice, we appreciate how the act of reading together fosters a sense of belonging. The embodied experience of sitting in circle, passing around a common book, and listening attentively to each other brings us together as one. Like Ignace and Smiles, Indigenous students are encouraged to bring their whole selves, and for some to reclaim parts of themselves impacted by colonial violence.

Métis scholar Andrea Kennedy and colleagues (2022) stress the importance of taking a strengths-based approach to anti-racism work in nursing education. Health professionals are often taught to use a deficit-based approach when working with Indigenous Peoples and these deficit narratives ignore Indigenous Peoples' strengths, disregard human rights, and reproduce structural inequalities. Informed by Elders' teachings, Kennedy et al. explain that a strengths-based approach focuses on positive attributes, centres relationships, honours legacy, and seeks to reconcile truth. By reading the Thanksgiving Address as an opening act to our anti-racism work, we forefront Indigenous ways of knowing and the strengths of Indigenous Peoples as a counter measure to the pervasive deficit narratives common in nursing education.

### **A Transformative Counter Measure**

Anishinaabe scholar, Jennifer Wemigwans, and non-Indigenous educator, Lanna MacKay, take up the Thanksgiving Address in elementary education as a way to

critically disrupt institutionalized Land Acknowledgements, a practice they fear can become performative (2023). When Land Acknowledgements become empty words, they can become "a mythical fabrication of Indigenousness that is consistent with settler dreams of benevolence and innocence" (Wark, 2021, p. 191). Rather than uncovering the truth about settler colonialism, Land Acknowledgements can act as colonized cultural protocols to legitimize stolen Land and reinforce settler colonial futurity. Wemigwans and Mackay look to the Thanksgiving Address as a hopeful strategy to vivify Land Acknowledgments and teach an "ontological orientation of relationality through the practice of gratitude with the human and more-than-human world" (p. 2). For Indigenous Peoples, Land acknowledgements can be an act of generosity that fosters hope and envisions Indigenous futurity. By honouring the relationships that exist between the people and Land, we resist settler colonial logics of consumerism and capitalism. It is an inclusive practice that honours Indigenous ways of knowing and supports Indigenous resurgence. As we take up the Address as our communal Land Acknowledgement in our practice, the teachings embedded within it transform our understanding of the Land, the nation of Canada, and our responsibilities to counter colonial violence.

*We gather our minds to greet and thank the enlightened Teachers who have come to help throughout the ages. When we forget how to live in harmony, they remind us of the way we were instructed to live as people. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to these caring Teachers. Now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 114).

*We now turn our thoughts to the Creator, or Great Spirit, and send greetings and thanks for all the gifts of Creation. Everything we need to live a good life is here on Mother Earth. For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send our choicest words of greetings and thanks to the Creator. Now our*

*minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 115)

It is rare to find a transformative pedagogical practice that is appropriate for young children and adults. The Thanksgiving Address is an ancient practice taken up by the Haudenosaunee to build consensus among their nations (Haudenosaunee Confederacy, 2025). Today, this ancient medicine teaches us about the natural world and our place in it. By centring Indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing, and connecting, the practice of reading the Thanksgiving Address disrupts colonial logics and fosters unity and transformation. Within its words, we find belonging and a way forward. As nursing educators, we look for transformative practices to help prepare our students and ourselves to be good relatives to the human and more-than-human world. Whether we take up this practice in a small group or online with text read over zoom, we have found the Thanksgiving Address to be life-giving and beneficial as it teaches us about reciprocity, responsibility, and a right relationship with Indigenous Peoples and the Land. As Haudenosaunee Faithkeeper Oren Lyons counseled Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), the Thanksgiving Address is a practice for anyone who wants to uphold gratitude, experience transformation, and come together in a good way. While we live and practice in Blackfoot territory and Treaty 7 Lands, we heed this lesson and have taken guidance from local Elders who affirm this practice. Through this work we become grounded, co-regulated, transformed, and kin.

*We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. Of all the things we have named, it is not our intention to leave anything out. If something was forgotten, we leave it to each individual to send such greetings and thanks in their own way. And now our minds are one.* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 117)

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