

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

A Letter from your Academic Aunties

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Dear, dearest Indigenous students and early career academics,

Taansi! Kwe! Ke aloha nui nō! Aanii! Mabrika! Yá'át'ééh! Aquay! Shé:kon! Whether you are working from your office, the library, the Land, the Water, or out where the WiFi doesn't reach, welcome!

Following the epistolary practice of Shawn Wilson, who writes to his sons while speaking to the larger audience of Indigenous and allied scholars, we address this letter to early career Indigenous scholars with the knowledge that the advice may apply broadly to minority groups working to navigate the academic institution (Wilson 2008). We write this letter to share a little bit of joy and advice about surviving and thriving in the academy. We see you, we hear you, we stand with you, and we are working to make and hold space for you here.

As Andrea Gomez (Laguna Pueblo and Chicana, Neuroscientist) (2021) mused, "I can't deny the fact that this power structure exists [in the university]. How do I prepare them [Indigenous students] for that world?" This letter draws together the struggles, sacrifices, successes, and, in many cases, joys of Indigenous/Native academics who've traversed the terrain as students to grow into our various roles as teachers, mentors, professors, accountable community members, and continual life learners. We recognize that academic spaces exist within power-laden institutions whose inherited logic of colonialism and systemic practices continue to harm Indigenous Peoples, communities, and nations, but we've also learned how to build careers in these spaces and cultivate opportunities that return benefits back to Indigenous communities. Here, we share what we have learned.

I: Who are we?

We co-authors are part of a growing network of Indigenous scholars primarily based in Canada and the United States. Many of us participated in a four-part roundtable in 2021¹—most of the quotes in this letter come from those roundtable discussions—where conversations were guided by what we wanted to ask *each other* as Indigenous scholars, rather than what we needed the academy to understand about us or our work. Our connections grew to include the more formal IndigeLab Network (indigelabnetwork.com), and new co-authors

¹ Aarons, Sarah, Rosanna 'Anolani Alegado, Stephanie Russo Carroll, Ximena Cid, Katherine C. Crocker, Dominique David-Chavez, et al. 2021, January 28-February 5. "IndigeLab Roundtables: Fourteen Indigenous Researchers Discuss their Research Spaces, Collectives, and Values with One Another. Roundtables, Online. Hosted by the Jackman Humanities Institute, University of Toronto.

whose additions to the paper were included in 2025. We have different upbringings, homelands, and research journeys, but are united in our common goal of navigating the academy. We also cite many other scholars, tethering our experiences to the work of those who have set precedents and acknowledged the challenges of working as a minority in academia.

We've adopted the overarching title of Academic Aunties (Lee 2016) because an Academic Auntie is more than a mentor; it is someone who will be your biggest cheerleader and a shoulder to cry on, who will keep you accountable by calling you into good relations, and who will do their best to protect you from harm and keep the "whisper networks" alive.² For this letter, "Auntie" is a role and a privilege that extends intra and intergenerational kinship into the academic space, and includes a range of genders including women, gender queer, and non-binary people. Both the terms Indigenous and Native are chosen to represent the various diverse and incommensurable communities and nations that claim us. Most of us are scientists, and we use the term "science" and "Scientist" throughout, but some of us are (also) artists, nurses, and activists who hold other approaches to knowledge creation and sharing. Our diversity showcases a collection of ways to be in good relations and demonstrates the power of building networks—diversity that, now, includes you.

II: Why are we doing academic work?

The short answer: our relations. As Indigenous scholars, we know the importance of not just acknowledging our relationships but also holding them as an ethical standard. Knowing who your relations are and what obligations you hold to them provides the foundation for the work you undertake inside and beyond institutional walls (Lopez and Tachine 2021; Arcand 2024; Reano et al. 2025). Kelsey Leonard (Shinnecock Nation, water scientist) (2021) shares: "[...] the research and the science that I do is Indigenous territory based, Indigenous community led. I'm just kind of the vessel and the tool by which to exercise [the community's ambitions]."

So, who are your relations? Stephanie Russo Carroll (2021) (Ahtna-Native Village of Kluti Kaah, Environmental Health Scientist) thinks about relations broadly, sharing: "You know these data are our relations, they're people, they're plants, they're all our relations. And how do we behave so that we're making sure that we're upholding our responsibilities in those relationships?" (also see Wilson and Wilson 1998). Extending further, Kristen Bos (in communication with co-authors, 2025) (Red River Métis, Indigenous Science and Technology Scientist) shares: "most of our non-human kin are at risk, living on the frontlines, and living with the same neo-imperial, colonial, and extractive violence that most of us are also living with, too". We practice scholarship in ways that recognize all our relations, providing a web of support that can re-situate our purpose in academia when we encounter barriers or tensions. In essence, your unique relations are the resounding first reason that *you can* do this work and are a continual guidance on *how to* do this work (e.g., Crocker 2018; Alegado 2019; Tsosie et al. 2022; Leonard et al. 2023; Samms Hurley et al. 2023).

But, working in colonial institutions can make fulfilling our commitments feel heavy or impossible. We are familiar with the stress of trying to get everything "right" while balancing humility, honesty, and reciprocity within institutional structures that were not built for those relational ethics and resist change (Milligan-McClellan 2019; Hird et al. 2023). During the roundtables, Dominique David-Chavez (2021) (Taíno, Environmental Scientist) spoke to both this stress and one of her techniques for dealing with the pressure:

² "Whisper networks" are informal structures where individuals privately and quietly share warnings about predators. Popularized during the #MeToo movement, these networks allow individuals to protect each other without requiring intervention from traditional authority.

I feel this huge pressure to get it right because so much work that has been done about our communities or about our knowledges [is] by other folks. It's so misrepresentative. It's so harmful. And so, to disrupt that is that I keep going back to the community and [...] *I maintain the lineage of where [the knowledge] came from* (emphasis added). [Ultimately,] getting it right is not just about the attribution and maintaining of lineages—it's also about leaving room for the knowledge that future generations hold, including yours. In this way, lineages of Indigenous knowledges are not linear, rather it is a spiral of what has been, what is, and what will come.

Knowing the next generation is surging forward situates our work. When the work is mentally and culturally taxing, Erica (Samms) Hurley (2021) (Mi'kmaq, Indigenous Health Nurse) thinks about an Elder, Calvin White's (personal communications with Erica Hurley, 2023, 2025), teaching that all the struggles, fighting and demanding acknowledgment of our existence was done so that younger people in the community, the next generation, would have opportunities that they did not have.

Ranalda Tsosie (2021) (Diné, Environmental Scientist) extends this, sharing: "our future generation, my children's generation, they'll be able to create some of these changes just by being educated and trying to view the world from this alternative perspective." As your Academic Aunties, we continue to persist, in part because we believe the next generation, ethically grounded in their commitments to human and more-than-human relations, will build a better future in the academy.

III: Can I do this work?

It's easy to say we want to change the future, but that is hard to do when embedded in settler institutions. Existing in the academy requires managing the tensions between academic expectations and community accountabilities (David-Chavez 2020; Gazing Wolf et al. 2024). Over time, this can begin to feel like fragmenting your identity, which can be a coping mechanism, or it can be a choice. Sarah Aarons (2021) (Iñupiaq, Earth Scientist) shares: "I used to kind of separate my identities. I felt like there was my Indigenous identity and then there was my Western science identity. And now, I don't really feel I have to separate those as much anymore." Just because we "wear many hats" does not necessarily mean that we "change who [we] are or how [we] show up but rather it is more important that [we] show up with good intentions, ethics, and kindness" (Erica Samms Hurley, in conversation with co-authors, 2025). The intersection of power, culture, and identity can be tricky to maneuver. Below are some questions and insecurities that can arise:

Am I Indigenous Enough?

Yes!

Am I Scientist Enough?

Yes!

Is Indigenous Science, Science?

Yes! Know your tools and their value. We come into academia with gifts and tools that often unsettle settler institutions. Feel empowered to use our medicines, methods, and tools! They are not less legitimate because

they are Indigenous, nor are they less Indigenous because they are used in settler institutions or come from Western science. Rosie 'Anolani Alegado (2021) (Kanakan 'Ōiwi and Pinay, Microbiologist) states:

[...] the tools that we use are whatever is appropriate, and we shouldn't have to feel chained or restricted by feeling we have to 'do Indigenous' everything. No, you use what fits and what works, and there isn't internal conflict. To me, when we can get to that space, then we've gotten to the future. (also see Walter and Andersen 2013).

Sometimes we are called to challenge the colonial narrative that attempts to undermine the power that Indigenous methods hold to perform science. Kat Milligan-McClellan (2021) (Iñupiaq, Microbiologist) shares:

I started decolonizing myself [by] recognizing that Indigenous knowledge *is* knowledge, and it's *scientific* knowledge. And it came from trial and error, and it came from [...] our people [making] hypotheses. They tested them. They had results. They passed that knowledge on to the next generation. It wasn't in some fancy journal, it was in oral history, but it was there.

Sarah Aarons (2021) adds,

We're all born scientists, you know. We make observations about how the weather is changing, how sea ice is forming and when it's melting because these have implications for hunting and that sort of thing. We've been using observations forever and applying them to make decisions.

While it may be difficult to advocate to use these methods, and sometimes you have to keep them safe, separating them from your practice does not make you more or less of a scientist, nor more or less Indigenous. At the same time, our practices do not become less Indigenous if we use them with perceived non-Indigenous tools. Dominique David-Chavez (2021) says,

As I'm developing, as I'm learning and growing past a lot of my vulnerabilities and bringing my own framework in from my community, I'm realizing that it becomes Indigenous when it's in our hands. I reference my digital machete.³ That's what I'll use sometimes when I'm doing our data science work. Or in the field, if we have our GPS or we're gathering quantitative data, when we re-matriate that data back into our value systems, back into our spiritual ways of knowing and being, and that's what's guiding those tools, I think to me that's when they become Indigenous.

Try not to get caught in the game of identity politics. Indigenous-researcher is not a binary. Thoughtfully engaging with our relations, histories, and tools is a step towards successfully working in colonial structures.

III: How can I do this work?

Having a strong foundation doesn't sidestep the difficulties of graduate school or navigating university structures. Whether its managing tokenism or completing your dissertation, we've learned some ways that allow us to sit at the table (or leave it), play the game (or change the rules), and, ultimately, find purpose in our work.

³ Digital machete' references welding tools for research and writing that can clear debris and paths for our work, that can harvest what we need, and that can also prepare us for battle when needed.

Sitting at “the table”

“The table” is a metaphor that asserts that power can be shared or conferred by those already sitting at the figurative decision-making table. Granting of a seat at this table implies a worthiness to participate, to be given a “voice.” However, the narrative of “the table” is hard to parse out as Indigenous academics: Does the table help us do the work we want to do? Do they wear us down (Kanter 1977)? Do we want to be invited? How can we break down perceived rules about being invited, being cordial, being something that we are not or risk losing our seat (Lee and Hicken 2016)? Do we flip the table? Do we light the table on fire? Do we build our own table? Do we get to eat once we are at the table? Is the food even good?

We cannot forget that amongst the many tables that exist, the academic table located in the university setting is one that was built almost a thousand years ago for the purposes of ensuring its own continuity and reproducing scholars with a narrow set of qualities. This is not to say that Native folks shouldn’t sit at the table, but we should understand our purpose in choosing to sit down and, if possible, what rules and practices everyone is following.

Sometimes being offered a place at “the table” is an opening to make space in venues that would otherwise have remained closed to non-conventional scholars. Kathleen Johnson (2021) (Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, Geochemist/Paleoclimatologist) reminds us that “[r]epresentation matters! It is so important for Indigenous students and early career researchers to see people who look like themselves in front of the classroom, in the lab, and in leadership positions within academia.” How we use our seats matters, too. When asked to be part of academic tables, Rosie ‘Anolani Alegado (2021) shares that,

I’m going to use this as an opportunity to call on and bring more people to the table. When you ask this [of me], you should know that I can be a conduit to bring more people into this space. But my words are not going to be for everybody, they’re just going to be my own words too, and I think that’s important.

Going a step further, Rosie ‘Anolani Alegado cites conversations with colleague Kamuela Enos (‘Ōiwi scholar) (personal communication with Rosanna ‘Anolani Alegado, 2021) where,

the first thing we talk about is who is at the table. But the ultimate disruption is dragging the table out into the community. Instead of saying, ‘Let’s just keep bringing people to the table,’ you’re bringing them into a space that is an inherently colonial structure, so let’s drag the table out into the community.

Often, there is a price for a seat. There may be gendered microaggressions that attempt to undermine your skills (Newton 2023; Showunmi 2023), or you may be liked and tokenized when it is beneficial for settlers’ careers but be ignored or receive outright hostile treatment when we aim to pushback on institutional structures (Erete et al. 2021; Hampton 2021; Hird et al. 2023).

This leads to an important warning: don’t be tricked into thinking that just because you have a seat at the table, that you are actually participating in conversation (Liboiron and Cotter 2021). In his Ballot or the Bullet speech, Malcolm X (1964) famously said,

I am one who doesn’t believe in deluding myself. I’m not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn’t make you a diner, unless you eat some of what’s on that plate.

If you find yourself at the table, but without power or resources, leave that table (Kanter 1977)!

Finally, “no” is a full sentence. Rupa Marya, doctor, UC San Francisco, expressed, “I don’t want a seat at the table, I want to set the table on fire and let the ashes feed the soil underneath to give rise to a different set of relationships based on care of the earth and care of the entire web of life to which we belong” (McCormick 2024). You can reject the table. You can go eat outside. That’s not a failure. We’re not recommending you take on the

weight of a thousand-year-old institution and fix it—that'd be a one-way track to burnout. Knowing the rules of the table is the first step to playing the game but know that sitting at the table is not your only option to enact change.

Tokenism

A core part of understanding academia is knowing the ins and outs of the tokenism trade. Tokenism is where we are fetishized and included in committees, papers, or collaborations to meet the aesthetics of inclusivity, rather than being respected on our own terms. It can feel gross. But, it can also be a resource. We ask ourselves and each other how can we make tokenism meaningful for us and our communities?

First, know that there can be power in owning affirmative action. Desi Small-Rodriguez (2021) (Northern Cheyenne and Chicana, Data Scientist) argues,

People say, oh, you just got this job because you're Native. Damn right. Damn right I did. [...] I am the affirmative action poster child and that's fine by me. You can tokenize me all you want as long as you are giving me the money that I need to get out to students and communities and for us to do the research and the work that we need to do. I am confident and secure in who I am. I have generations behind me that I don't care if I'm tokenized.

Max Liboiron (2021) (Red River Métis, Geographer) agrees, and is all about,

[L]everaging [tokenism]. Part of the way I understand my role in academia is as a *grifter*. I'm here to circulate, to walk the walk, to talk the talk, and take all the money and give it back to Land. And tokenism is one of the ways I can do that. And I am fine with that. There's this huge granting agency that said, 'You cannot get these massive grants unless you have someone on your 20-person team that does Indigenous engagement.' And there are all these scientists being like, 'What now?' And I said, 'I am for sale! For 350K a year, I will be your engagement. But you do not get my data. I do not come to your meetings. I do not publish for you. But I get all the money.' That's my price. And one group that was like, 'Yeah, we'll take those terms.' And so, I hand that money over to Indigenous watershed protection, and they can do their work. That grant money was from stolen Land, so now it's going back to Land, and tokenism flipped that switch. (emphasis added)

You can also move money within the project you are running by building strength-based teams: "I build people into my grants. I build Elders and young people into my grants at the same rates that I would a scientist with mainstream degrees" (Small-Rodriguez, 2021).

You can leverage your position to uphold your commitments. Sometimes, you can drag that table outside and distribute the food. While we are pro-tokenism if it is on your terms, that means knowing when the terms don't work for you or for your relations. Speaking on balancing your responsibilities with your health, Ximena Cid (2021) (Yaqui and Chicana, Physicist) adds:

It's also really important to remember that you are not responsible for everything. In academia, people of color, women of color, Black, Indigenous people get asked to do any and everything and we get tokenized for things. Sometimes it builds leverage. You know, what can I give? What are you going to give me? But take moments to really think about your own self-care, your own self-love. There are days and times that I just can't, and I really want to. I think that project, and that talk, and that panel is going to be amazing, and I really want to, but I just mentally, emotionally, physically can't, and that's okay, too. There are times where you have all the capacity to do it, and there are other times where you need to go back inward and say no. And learning how to say no is very, very difficult, especially when you're an early career scientist.

Practicing boundaries ensures that you can continue to do this work. There is an invisible emotional toll and “cultural taxation” that these actions require (Erica Samms Hurley, in conversation with co-authors, 2025). Tokenism can be exhausting:

You can get consumed by the emotional labor that your non-Indigenous colleagues want to place upon you, whether ignorantly or maliciously, it doesn’t really matter. Emotional labor is still emotional labor and so I think the greatest advice that I’ve received is to pick your battles wisely, set boundaries. It’s okay to say no and it’s okay, at the point where you feel confident, to ditch collegiality and prioritize your own work and the communities that you’re responsible for. (Leonard 2021)

But, know that not all tokenism can be leveraged. There are instances where you don’t want to touch it with a ten-foot pole: “[t]here’s one place where tokenism is no good, and that’s a committee. If you are the only and the lonely, get out. That way lies burn out” (Liboiron 2021; see also Kantor 1977). In essence, “get an invite to the table, play the game but don’t let the game consume you. Then you’ve won” (Erica Samms Hurley, in conversation with co-authors, 2025).

Making Choices

So how do you decide what to join and what to refuse? For early career scholars and students, you’ve got to ask yourself about the twin requirements of passion and feasibility:

What is the project you really want to do that you just burn for that is your driving passion, and that is why you’re doing what you’re doing? OK, great. Keep that. Keep that in your heart and your soul. Keep grounded in that. What is the project that you know you can finish if push comes to shove, if your funding gets pulled, if your advisor moves on? If everything were to crash and burn, what could you still finish? (Small-Rodriguez 2021)

Feasibility is essential because a lot of our work requires us to be accountable to relations. There is a difference between what’s doable now, with your emotional bandwidth, funding, and support, and what’s doable later when you have the credentials, money, and more autonomy:

[...] I always tell the students, how do you just get done, literally? How do we just get you over the line and done? Because you’re not going to stay in grad school forever. Your PhD and your dissertation are not the be all and end all of your contributions. How do we get you through so that you can then focus on that project that keeps burning and keeps you going? It’s tough. It’s stuff white students don’t have to face, for the most part, this level of dissonance. (Small-Rodriguez 2021)

Choosing not to do something can feel like a failure, but it’s not:

I found early on in my academic career that I needed to learn to pick my battles. When someone said that originally, I couldn’t hear it. I was like, ‘no, this is wrong. And it needs to end. It needs to stop. We need to fight.’ Part of [being in academia] is learning which battles to fight and whether you have the strength to fight, particularly in [settler-colonial] dominated institutions. And that said, find the set of boundaries and find the things that give you joy, and that allow you to build your purpose, and to build back those community responsibilities. Always center the work around that. (Leonard 2021)

There is no singular right way to get through graduate school or build an academic career. Plan for the unexpected and adjust when needed. You can have many plans, detour from your plan, change projects, and place some projects on the top shelf for later. That’s okay!

Mentorship

The best support for knowing when to pick your battles and how to build plans with backdoors is to have a *network* of support rather than just one mentor (e.g., Kim et al. 2024). In academic spaces, a good mentor (or three!) is the gold standard. However, the Eurocentric mentorship model problematically promotes building relationships under hierarchical structures, often with the mentor occupying a powerful position above the student (Hinsdale, 2015). Holding a more senior position does not give anyone the right to direct you, never mind harm you. A mentor should be able to guide your hopes and dreams, not demean or invalidate them. A mentor should be accommodating to what you want while knowing when to call you in when you need guardrails. Importantly, a mentor *should not* be putting their career path ahead of yours or projecting their own goals onto to you.

For people of color working in the academy, there are often three types of mentors—Collectors (mentors who actively "collect" students of Color for their diversity roster), Nightlights (intermittent guides who shine light on the 'black box' of academia and understand systematic barriers), and Allies (who combine the strengths of Nightlights with deeper empathy, responsiveness, and ongoing commitment) (Martinez-Cola 2020). Collectors, while the most common, are often well-meaning and may certainly make mis-steps, but they are not necessarily without value. Allies, on the other hand, are rare and may take time to identify. In combination, these individuals can build a network of support. But it's not your job to train Collectors so they are more like Nightlights or Allies.

Know that your initial dream collaborator may not be the right mentor for you. Ximena Cid (2021) states, "I had a faculty job before I did my postdoc with founders of my subfield physics education, very internationally known. I was excited and ecstatic to be there. And then I found out, you know, sometimes the people you admire are not the best at working with you." Finding mentors is difficult when your perceived mentors are reinforcing standards that do not align with your values:

I would consistently challenge who our populations were. How do we study them? How are we defining best practices and measures of success? How are we defining curriculum that's supposed to be supportive of everybody when we're using an elite institution as our base that doesn't support people like me, that doesn't support the environment that I came from. It doesn't even acknowledge the fact that my undergraduate education was so drastically different from the students that we were sampling. And yet this internationally known group has laid the foundation for my field in terms of benchmarks. (Cid 2021)

Ultimately, if few of your values align with your mentors, then they are probably not the right mentor for you (David-Chavez et al. 2024).

That's not to say that you must always agree with your mentor on everything. A good mentor will call you in when needed: "surrounding yourself with the right people is key. Those Aunties and Uncles who challenge not only the systems, but also you, are important because those same people will always help you grow as a person, as a community member" (Erica Samms Hurley, in conversation with co-authors, 2025). Mentors should know when to call you in to reassert what matters: "sometimes you need to get [called in] by, your aunties and uncles to get back into that mindset" (Small-Rodriguez, 2021). Katherine Crocker (2021) (Kaw Nation, Biologist) shares that when "we see conflict in academia as part of mainstream culture in that anytime there's conflict, it's interpreted as antagonistic rather than working together to come to an understanding or bringing people back together." Calling into relations is a key role of mentors.

There are many different mentorship styles, and you will have a variety of mentee needs, so you should not expect any single person to fulfill all of your needs (Reano 2020). Lydia Jennings (2021) (Pascua Yaqui and Wixárika, Microbiologist and Environmental Scientist) advises students to start your committee early" and

shares that, “having multiple mentors is really important [...] across disciplines, across career stages, peer mentors,” and outside of your formal committee, advocating for a diverse network of mentors.

It is valuable to seek out mentorship from those who share aspects of your identity as Lani Tsinnajinnie (2021)(Diné, Hydrologist) shares: “[It] helps me to be able to do the work that I have that I do, knowing that there’s a lot of support behind me [...]. I like being part of this large group of Native faculty and also to be able to mentor and teach a lot of Indigenous students. It gives me energy to do the work.” If you can’t find someone in your institution, there are many opportunities to connect with mentors in other academic networks. Look towards identity-based affinity organizations in your field and attend diversity-focused conferences. Don’t rule out mentorship from family, friends, Elders and consider collaborative ways to co-create research projects (Kathleen Johnson, in conversation with co-authors, 2025). Though we are small in number, we are mighty at finding each other across distances

A final note about mentorship: as Academic Aunties we can attest to the great joy that mentorship brings to our lives. Not only does it guide you as a learner, but it provides a lot of hope for carrying out this work even when it proves hard. Kathleen Johnson (2021) shares:

for me, joy comes through the love of the science and the excitement of creating new knowledge, but even more so, it comes from the relationships and community I’ve built, the students and early-career scholars I’ve mentored, and the impacts I’ve had on people (and vice-versa).

So don’t be afraid to ask an Indigenous person for mentorship, formal or informal. It fills us up.

Publishing, citing, and sharing knowledges

What community knowledge and experiences can be published? Who should be doing the publishing? Who am I publishing for? The academic institute is built upon a “publish or perish” paradigm, but often the demand to publish does not align with the values and processes necessary to uphold community priorities. Dominique David-Chavez (2021) describes how it can take a long time to figure out how to do it right: “People are publishing, publishing, publishing, but I’ve noticed myself and a lot of my fellow scholars, Indigenous scholars, we’re very slow because we keep coming back to our community.”

For many of us, the process of publishing starts years earlier with the building of relationships that set the foundation of our shared processes and accountability. If you aren’t sure what can or should be published or attributed for knowledge, then turn to your Indigenous mentors, Elders, Decision Making Councils, and Academic Aunties who are “not just [there to] like help us when we need correction, but to provide guidance and love” (Small-Rodriguez 2021). That includes guidance and love about if and how to share knowledge.

You don’t publish in isolation. Citational practices often privilege certain voices over others, conferring greater power to specific persons (e.g. white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual) and further entrenching systems of oppression in silencing others (Mott and Cockayne 2017). Good citational practices extend beyond acknowledging who’s work you’ve read, to cite Elders and knowledge keepers (MacLeod 2021), dreams (Shawanda 2020), youth and junior scholars (Burgess et al. 2021), and oral histories (Archibald 2008).

Reflecting Shawn Wilson’s (2008) claim that, “if the research hasn’t changed you as a person, then you haven’t done it right,” Rene Begay (in conversation with co-authors, 2025) (Diné, Geneticist and Public Health Scientist) said that “[...] the research or knowledge that you are trying to produce should be pushing you to think differently, think with your community, to make progress in your field in the right ways.” As a Native scholar, it is important that you do not forget who you are or where you come from when publishing. You are the conduit for the work

that you and many others did; you do not publish alone, even if you are not doing community-based work (footnotes in Liboiron 2021).

Remember that not all information is for sharing (Battiste 2008; Younging 2018). The sanctity of some methods and knowledges are just for you and your journey. For example, the things that you hold in your sacred bundles that can guide your work are intended for you and you alone:

[The] sacred medicine that you alone hold [...] is your connection to the spirit world, mother earth, father sky, and connection to all living beings. It is a bundle that guides you in the difficult times and the good times. It is yours to build up and hold sacred. It is your responsibility to keep sacred to you and it keeps all the values from songs, prayers, rituals, and beliefs. It is something that you do not share with others to use but is something that you use to guide your life and how you help others. (in Rene Begay, in conversation with co-authors, 2025)

At times it seems that some people do not believe us about our world and that some evidence might help—our personal stories, things our communities have dealt with, or how we feel. Ximena Cid (2021) shares:

I think that as Native people, when we process colonization, there's a whole ton of trauma and history that comes along with that. And you have to balance what you're willing to share of yourself, because sometimes people want that from you, and it becomes sensationalized. And these are still living things that we — that our communities — are processing. So be careful of what you share. Be careful of what you share because you don't know how people are going to use that.

So, how do you strike a balance between educating settler institutions and protecting ourselves and other people that are implicated in our stories? Max Liboiron's rule of thumb is to avoid damage-centered narratives and avoid trauma porn in mixed company (Tuck 2009; Folsom 2014), only pointing up to structures of relation or oppression rather than pointing down to effects on family.

Charismatic as the practice may be, I will never open a vein to bleed for my audience to make the case that colonial violence exists in our everyday lives. I have watched so many of you [young scholars] at conferences talk about your traumas and your pain, often to make the case that our intellectual labour has stakes, has roots, has validity, has teeth. Personally, and professionally, I don't think academic spaces have earned that blood. I watch the (mostly white) academic audiences at these talks become rapt and feel the pleasure and the depth of blood-and-trauma talk, but I also think that these arguments are only heard in a way that allows many to continue to believe that Indigenous people are inherently traumatized, always already bleeding. Charisma, after all, is about resonance with existing values and ideas. (Liboiron 2021, viii)

Critically, the audience you intend to share information with influences what you should share. Rene Begay (in conversation with co-authors, 2025) shares:

I believe creating accessible knowledge is important, but discussions should be had about what is made for the masses vs. the immediate community. It is important to ask yourself if it is critical to publish everything you do or to be strategic about what you share with the world. The world does not need everything we produce as Indigenous scholars therefore our community should come first. What do they think? What are their thoughts?

The knowledge we create in settler institutions should be accessible to our communities, but sometimes the works we create are simply not intended for the academy, and that's okay too. Dominique David-Chavez (2021) says:

in terms of, ethics and protocols, I feel like it is the right for Indigenous youth to have access to their lands, to their foods, to their first teachers, to their Elders, and that they are acknowledged as those primary sources of knowledge and data, rather than right now the assimilation education system,

which is continuing to sever us from those knowledge bases. [...] That should be their human and Indigenous right, to have access to those things as a given. And then if other folks want to learn about it, they get to make those decisions about who can access that knowledge and what context they should, what they should come with to show that they're ready for that. But I feel like those youth are first and foremost, and then academia. But our whole model of publishing is for scientific journals that nobody in our community is accessing. For example, for my PhD, only those outputs counted as anything. My community outputs were nothing to my institution. I would like to see that change.

One of the best ways to ensure accessibility is to begin thinking beyond the peer-reviewed article. There is a time and a place for the peer-reviewed article, but we also can create multiple assets to share knowledge broadly. A report, a website, a video, a toolkit, or notes from community sessions are all transformative methods for sharing knowledges, especially if the data about a community is also owned by a community (Carroll et al. 2019; Carroll et al. 2024; Hudson et al. 2023). Ultimately, knowledge must not only be accessible to the Indigenous communities we are accountable to, but we also have a responsibility to ensure attribution, ownership, and control of that knowledge as well.

IV: What now?

As your Academic Aunties, we want to share that you can flourish in academic spaces. There is something inherently joyful about being the vessel for change and finding the networks that support you in becoming the next generation of scientists, mentors, activists, and life-long learners—especially if you do it with others. In summarizing the experience of doing this work, Mukhtara Ayotėjú Adékúnbi Yusuf (2021) (Yoruba, Designer/Artist/Researcher) said: "I might not be able to like sit down and transcribe what the knowledge of this material or of this plant or of this textile is, but it's something that I can feel, it's something that somatically, spiritually, emotionally and in all these ways continues to live on, even if I can't put it into words, and for me that's a lot of the hope within the work we do [...]." You are not alone and should feel empowered to use the support of your Academic Aunties, those who have come before you, and all those who are yet to come.

Sincerely,

Your Academic Aunties:

Erdanya Anderson, Rene L. Begay, Erica (Samms) Hurley, Ranalda Tsosie, Lani Tsinnajinnie, Mukhtara Ayotėjú Adékúnbi Yusuf, Katherine C. Crocker, Kristen Bos, Kelsey Leonard, Dominique David-Chavez, Kat Milligan-McClellan, Desi Small-Rodriguez, Sarah Aarons, Lydia Jennings, Ximena Cid, Kathleen R. Johnson, Rosanna 'Anolani Alegado, Stephanie Russo Carroll, Max Liboiron, Andrea M. Gomez

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