

Peer Review Article

# You Will Never Be Enough in a Settler Colonial System:

## Reclaiming Land-Based Identity as Decolonial Healing and Responsibility

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### Abstract

This decolonial, reflective story-sharing paper centers on reclaiming land-based identities as a ceremonial process of healing and resistance within the enduring structures of settler colonialism. Drawing from my lived experiences and guided by story-sharing methodology, it examines the systematic oppressions and reconstruction of identity, land, and spirituality imposed by settler colonial education, immigration, and governance systems. These Eurocentric systems sustain disconnections from land-based relationships while imposing hierarchical identities designed to maintain colonial power. Challenging these imposed narratives, this work affirms the significance of relational ways of knowing rooted in land-based ceremonies, responsibilities, and teachings. Positioned as

both inquiry and activism, reflective story-sharing emerges as a vital decolonial method to resist settler colonial domination and advocate for land-based adaptations. Reclaiming stolen identities is framed not only as resistance but also as a political and spiritual act of love, responsibility, and healing—toward a future grounded in justice, reciprocity, and relational accountability.

## Keywords

Decolonization, Indigenous healing, land-based identity, relational knowledge, story-sharing

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## Introduction

In ongoing settler colonial societal and educational systems, the challenges of decolonizing meanings of land-based identity are critical and essential. The legacies of colonialism continue to shape individual and collective understandings of identity, often marginalizing land-based and relational ways of knowing (Datta, 2018, 2020, 2024). These settler colonial frameworks impose colonial categories, promoting an individualistic *I* over the collective *we*, thereby alienating individuals from their land, culture, and spirituality (Smith, 2012). Decolonizing identity involves dismantling these systems, reasserting relational ways of being, and reclaiming land-based identities that honor interconnectedness and reciprocity (Datta, 2015). For me as land-based scholar, land is not only a source of knowledge but also a living relation that shapes ways of being, perceiving, and knowing (Datta, 2015). The term *land-based culture* refers to understanding the land as a source of science, spirituality, and responsibility. It is also a process of recognizing our responsibility to protect it. Similarly, ceremony is not a generalized practice but a deeply responsible act—entangled with land, spirituality, language, knowledge, water, and more-than-human worlds (Paul et al., 2021). Therefore, recognizing these specificities affirms that land-based identity is simultaneously an ontological position and an epistemological practice, central to both healing and decolonial resistance. This paper highlights these challenges, emphasizing the importance of this reclamation as an act of resistance, healing, and transformation (Battiste, 2013; Coulthard, 2014).

Settler colonialism is not a historical relic—it is an ongoing structure that continues to shape Indigenous and racialized experiences, particularly through

systems of education, governance, and identity construction.<sup>1</sup> The settler colonialism operates by severing relational ties to land, displacing spiritual and cultural knowledge, and replacing them with rigid, hierarchical systems that uphold Eurocentric norms (Battiste, 2013; Simpson, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The central objective of this paper is to expose how colonial structures—through formal education, immigration policy, and spiritual doctrine—have systematically stolen land-based identities, and to advocate for decolonial reclamation through story-sharing and relational knowledge. Drawing on lived experiences from Bangladesh to North America, the study shows reflective storytelling to both analyze and resist these systems. It centres the importance of land-based identity as a ceremony of healing, activism, and resurgence (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

The erasure of land-based identities and practices through colonial systems is not merely historical; it persists in modern educational structures that prioritize Eurocentric knowledge and achievement over collective, relational learning (Simpson, 2014; Smith, 2012). These systems disrupt cultural continuity, replacing ceremonies and spiritual practices rooted in land with commodified and hierarchical notions of education and identity. Settler colonialism systems have systematically disconnected individuals from their land-based roots, often reconfiguring their identities in ways that serve settler colonialism power structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Reclaiming land-based identities is critical not only for personal and cultural healing but also for creating sustainable ways of living and learning. Land-based identities offer pathways to understanding the interconnectedness of humans, land, and all beings (Alfred, 2005; Grande, 2015). These identities challenge commodification and exploitation, advocating for relationships rooted in respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. As my healing stories of identity reveal, this reclaim is both deeply personal and inherently political, challenging settler colonialism structures that seek to silence and marginalize land-based ways of knowing (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

The significance of reclaiming these identities lies in their ability to transform both individuals and systems. For individuals, this process reconnects them with their cultural roots, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). For communities, it strengthens collective resilience and cultural revitalization. At a systemic level, decolonizing identity disrupts the epistemological dominance of settler colonialism frameworks,

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<sup>1</sup> While colonialism refers to the historical structures of domination and extraction, coloniality describes the enduring logics, mindsets, and systems that persist even after formal colonial rule (St. Denis, 2007). As Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) argues in *Hospicing Modernity*, addressing ecological crises requires confronting these deeper colonial patterns of thought and practice.

opening spaces for diverse ways of knowing and being (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Marker, 2019).

This paper has three primary goals. First, it aims to explore the mechanisms through which settler colonialism systems have stolen and reconstructed identities, focusing on the role of education, spirituality, and power (Dei, 1996). Second, it seeks to highlight the transformative potential of reclaiming land-based identities, using my lived experiences as a healing lens (Cajete, 2000; Regan, 2010). Third, it advocates for decolonial methodologies that center story-sharing as a means of resistance and reclaiming. Engaging with these goals, the paper contributes to broader conversations on decolonization, emphasizing the urgent need to reclaim and honor land-based identities within contemporary societal and educational contexts (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012).

Decolonizing identity from land-based perspectives are vital, requiring individuals and communities to navigate complex intersections of power, culture, and resistance. Reclaiming land-based identities, we can challenge the erasure of our histories and cultures, asserting our right to define who we are and who we need to be (Simpson, 2017; Tuck et al., 2014). This process is not merely an act of defiance but a critical responsibility. Through decolonial colonialism methodologies, such as reflective story-sharing and reconnecting with land and land-based culture, we can create spaces for our self-determination to the land we belong to (Archibald et al., 2019; Wilson, 2008).

## Positionality Statement

As a land-based minority researcher from Bangladesh and a racialized scholar residing in Treaty 7 Territory, Canada, my positionality is situated within intersecting histories of colonization, displacement, and resistance. This position is epistemologically and ethically informed by decolonial and land-based frameworks that centre relational accountability, reciprocity, and ceremony as core principles of meaningful research. My scholarly orientation develops through sustained learning from community Elders, knowledge-keepers, and land-based practitioners who have taught me to understand land not as property or resource but as identity, relative, and pedagogy. I inhabit a complex and often contradictory location—simultaneously shaped by the enduring legacies of settler colonialism in Bangladesh and implicated within settler colonial structures in Canada. This relational complexity necessitates humility, reflexivity, and continuous processes of unlearning and relearning. As a decolonial, anti-racist, and land-based researcher, my responsibility is to engage meaningfully with Indigenous and land-based communities, respecting their sovereignty while reclaiming my own disrupted cultural and spiritual connections to land. I understand research as a ceremonial act rather than a neutral practice—an exemplified process of relational care and accountability. Through reflective, land-based story-sharing, I position myself not as a detached academic but as a participant in collective decolonial healing, bridging transformational experiences of colonial violence, resurgence, and reclaiming.

## Decolonial Reflective Research Framework and Methodology: Story-Sharing as a Method

Reflective stories is a process of centering my lived experiences, reclaiming my relationships, and centering my land-based cultural practices as sources of knowledge and healing (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). Connecting in decolonial and land-based epistemologies, this research framework and methodology challenge colonial notions of fixed objectivity, embracing the relational and situated knowledge (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2013). Prioritizing decolonial personal narratives and collective memories, story-sharing creates spaces for voices that have been marginalized or silenced to be heard, validated, and honored (Grande, 2015; Simpson, 2014).

My decolonial story-sharing serves as a ceremonial act for me to reclaim my land-based identity and my lost spiritual relationships with my land and communities. The term *ceremonial act* reflects my process of reclaiming my rights, strength, and self-determination in expressing my truths. Ceremony here is not invoked in abstract, but with specificity: it emerges through relational practices such as responsibility to plants and waters, seasonal rituals, memories carried in language, and teachings that connect humans with more-than-human relationships. These practices situate knowledge in place and affirm that learning is inseparable from responsibility to land, water, and community. Framing story-sharing as ceremony therefore highlights its role as both method and worldview, bridging ontology and epistemology through lived practice.

My reflective stories reveal how settler colonialism systems have sought to sever connections, replacing relational ways of knowing with hierarchical and extractive frameworks (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Sharing my land-based and settler colonialism stories helped to create my self-determination, and my responsibility to protect our traditional knowledge and practice as science. It also helps the validity and importance of land-based identities and relational knowledge. Story-sharing thus became a critical tool for decolonization, enabling me to reconnect with the land that currently I am living and coming from. This process is also helpful for reclaiming and reconnecting cultural roots, and for communities to reclaim our collective histories and practices (Cajete, 2000; Dei, 1996). Therefore, decolonial reflective methodology, as exemplified through my story-sharing, emphasizes the interconnectedness of knowledge, identity, and land. My stories are not merely recounting events; they are acts of creation and transformation. They carry cultural teachings, healing, values, and responsibilities, guiding me and my community toward healing and justice (Archibald, 2008; Marker, 2019). Thus, my story-sharing is both a method of inquiry and a form of activism, challenging settler colonialism systems of knowledge production while creating relational and land-based ways of being (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Simpson, 2017).

From my land-based language and cultural teachings, I have come to understand that I am part of a collective *we*. This *we* includes all beings and

elements of creation—the land, water, plants, animals, insects, the sun, the moon, and all that sustains life. When I use *my*, it reflects my personal journey of reclaiming a land-based identity shaped by both Bangladesh and Canada. When I use *our*, it reaches toward the shared teachings of my communities and other Indigenous traditions, while recognizing that these teachings are deeply contextual and not universal. This distinction helps me stay rooted in my lived experience while honouring the collective wisdom that guides me. My relationship with the land is deeply healing—it reminds me that I am never alone. Reconnecting with the land beneath my feet is a continual act of renewal, respect, and belonging. Through these relationships, I have learned that our sense of self, sustainability, emotions, empathy, and spirituality all emerge from how we live in relation to the land and to one another.

My stories are central to my decolonial responsibility. Unlike methodologies in settler colonialism that often extract and commodify knowledge, story-sharing is interconnected in reciprocity and respect (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). It acknowledges the storyteller's agency and the relational context in which stories are shared, emphasizing the responsibilities of both the teller and the listener. This relational approach disrupts the power dynamics inherent in settler colonialism research, creating spaces for mutual learning and collective transformation (Smith, 2012; Tuck et al., 2014).

Through story-sharing, I engage in a process of decolonial reflection, examining how settler colonialism systems have forced me to shape my identities by *others* and reclaim the relationships that sustain them (Coulthard, 2014; Said, 2004; Simpson, 2014). This process is deeply personal and inherently political, challenging the settler colonialism narratives that seek to define and control land-based peoples. Centering reflective stories, I not only reclaim my identity but also contribute to broader movements for decolonization and justice (Freire, 1968/1970; Regan, 2010).

The strengths of story-sharing lie in its ability to connect individuals and communities, creating solidarity and collective action (Archibald et al., 2019; Grande, 2015). Sharing my lived experiences, I invite my readers to reflect on their own journeys, challenging settler colonialism systems and reclaiming their land-based identities. In this way, story-sharing becomes a substance for decolonial transformation, creating spaces where diverse voices and ways of knowing can thrive (Battiste, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

## Findings: Stolen Identities— My Life is Not Mine

In this decolonial reflective paper based on six stories from many stories, I aim to share my ceremonial journey with how my land-based identities were stolen, reconstructed, and governed by settler colonialism systems of education, spirituality, and influence. These processes not only stripped away my personal sense of belonging but also eroded our collective understanding of sustainability. Sharing my stories is more than a recounting—it is an act of reclamation. Through my decolonial stories, I am reclaiming my identity(ies), my

relationships, my responsibilities, and my healing. My stories are my ceremonies, the rituals through which I rebuild what was taken and honor what remains.

## Stolen Relational Meanings of Learning: Who I Am and Who I Need to Be

My stories taught me that our belongingness, and our relationships, define our sustainability, our identity, our emotions, our empathy, and our spirituality. Our relationships with the land are not separate from our spirituality—they are our spirituality. Without these relationships, we have no identity. For instance, my mother often reminded me of this interconnectedness through her land-based teachings. Every morning, she encouraged me to pray to the plants, fishes, and insects, recognizing them as our gods. These gods are not distant or invisible; they are present in our lives, tangible and vibrant. We feel them, touch them, and celebrate them. They (i.e., all non-humans) are our family members, living with us. They are within and from me. These land-based teachings helped me to understand that our land-based relationships are not just connections; they are ceremonies and celebrations that guide us toward understanding, responsibility, and healing. To be meaningfully educated, in this sense, is to learn through land-based ceremonies and relational practice. It is a process of becoming a knowledge-keeper for taking the responsibility of protecting our land-based relationships. This form of relational learning teaches us that there is no separation or hierarchy between human and non-human. It is about love, respect, and care for all beings. Every culture, whether human or non-human, has agency. The essence of this learning is reciprocity and the shared understanding that we all belong to one another.

However, these relational and land-based teachings were systematically stripped from me through the settler colonialism education systems I encountered from childhood onward. From primary school to high school, from university in my home country (i.e., Bangladesh) to international institutions in Western countries (i.e., Canada and USA) I was offered no space to acknowledge or practice land-based culture and spirituality. These systems were designed to undermine and control immigrants, alienating me from my land-based knowledge, identity, education, and spirituality. My settler colonialism education has stolen the collective *we* from me with an individualized *I*, a concept rooted in settler colonialism hierarchies and power. This shift went beyond a personal loss; it was an intentional dismantling of our ceremonies, and displacement from our land, relationships, and responsibilities. By the mainstream settler colonialism spirituality (i.e., non-land-based), our land-based relationships with non-humans were stolen. Settler colonial gods became distant, abstract entities. Our land-based ceremonies, once rooted in collective reciprocity, were replaced by rigid doctrines and colonial spirituality.

This transformation imposed fixed categories of identity—human, gender, nationality, caste, and religion—stripping away the fluidity and interconnectedness of our transnational and transcultural identities. In the name

of progress and profit, our land-based lives, emotions, and dreams were commodified and stolen. The settler colonialism system did not simply happen to us; it was meticulously crafted to generate uncertainty, dependency, and profit for a few at the expense of land-based minority communities. Today, I reflect on these experiences not as a passive observer but as an active participant in the process of reclaiming. The systems that caused this loss were never broken—they were intentionally designed to create and maintain these divisions, ensuring that inequities would persist. Yet through this reflection, I try to reclaim who I am and who I need to be in the Indigenous land where I am currently living in Canada. Thus, reclaiming land-based identities and relationships is an ongoing journey—a ceremonial act of healing, resistance, and love.

### Story of “You Do Not Have Enough Indigeneity”

In this reflective story, I share how settler colonialism processes have stolen not only my land-based identity but also my Indigeneity. This settler colonialism process was deliberate and systematic, creating a world where my identity, culture, and stories were rendered invisible, insignificant, less, invalid, or subordinate to settler colonialism narratives. To explain this, I must reclaim my land-based identity, which is deeply rooted in the community and culture where I was born and raised—a community where every practice, ritual, and relationship was intertwined with the land.

In my minority land-based culture in Bangladesh, daily life began with ceremonies of gratitude and respect for the sun, water, plants, animals, and all beings as family members, parents, and gods. These relationships were reciprocal and sacred, forming the foundation of who we were. As I explained in the above section, I was taught through land-based learning from my mother that my identity came not from an individualistic *I* but from the collective *we*—a network of relationships that defined our responsibilities and grounded our spirituality. Our relationships were our gods, our ceremonies, and our education. This learning taught us that sustainability, empathy, and identity were not isolated concepts but relational and interconnected.

Yet, these sacred teachings were systematically erased by settler colonialism institutions such as education, constitutions, and legal systems. From my childhood schooling in Bangladesh to university and beyond, I was forced to disconnect from my land-based knowledge. The settler colonialism education system devalued our culture and labelled our ways of knowing as “uncivilized” or “unscientific.” Settler colonialism science, often cloaked in mainstream religious ideology which is not connected with land and land-based spirituality, taught us that our land-based spirituality was invalid and that salvation lay in adopting an “outsider” way of thinking. For land-based learning, heaven was our land—a living, active agency—but settler colonialism education made us see our land as a resource to exploit or as something distant from spirituality.

Through settler colonialism structures, we were forced to learn our colonizers as heroes and to vilify our land protectors as enemies. This colonial

education was not neutral; it was a tool used, and continuously being used, to take away *us* from our land, land-based spirituality, and identity. Under its force, our land-based sustainable practices were replaced with extractive ones, and we became strangers to our own land as we did not learn the importance of land-based culture and practice. Members of our community were oppressed, our communities were displaced, and our spirits stolen—all in the name of "education and progress."

The more we conformed to settler colonialism values, the more we were rewarded with the illusion of acceptance. Silence became resilience, and forgetting became survival. Like many others, I was shaped by this process, forced to see my land-based culture as backward and irrelevant. The term *land-based culture* refers to understanding the land as a source of spirituality and recognizing our responsibility to protect it. When I had the opportunity to engage with Indigenous land-based education in Canada, I began to reclaim what was stolen from me. Through the guidance of Indigenous Elders, educators, and activists, I learned to reconnect with my roots and speak up for my land-based identity and culture. However, this journey was challenged by my home country's settler colonialism educators. In my home country, I was told my reclaiming was inauthentic. My identity was threatened by those who claimed the power to define it. When I began to speak up through my decolonial and anti-racist academic work, I received threats from individuals from my home country asserting their power to dictate who I could be. "We are the majority; we have the power to define you. Without our permission, you are no one," they threatened me many times over the phone and e-mails. I was given the impression that "our lives are not ours". These threats extended into my professional life, as settler colonialism educators from my home country undermined my work and shared false narratives with my mentors and peers abroad.

Even in Canada, where I sought refuge in decolonial and anti-racist education, settler colonialism structures persisted. Emails from my home country's mainstream educators questioned my authenticity, and some Canadian educators and activists took those narratives at face value. Once again, I was told I was "not Indigenist enough." The settler colonialism structures that had stolen my identity in Bangladesh now echoed through systems in Canada, perpetuating the erasure and invalidation of land-based people. This experience has deepened my understanding of how settler colonialism power operates globally to silence and marginalize. It creates fixed, oppressive definitions of identity that deny the fluidity and relationality of land-based ways of being. It insists that we, as land-based people, are never enough and that only settler colonialism systems have the power to define us.

Despite this, I continue to reclaim my identity and resist these narratives. My decolonial journey is a ceremony of resistance and resilience. It is a reminder that my identity is not for others to define—it is rooted in my land, my relationships, and my responsibilities. Even as I am told I am "not enough," I hold onto the truth that my Indigeneity is beyond settler colonialism definitions.

My stories, my culture, and my connections to the land are more than enough, and they always will be. I do not need validation from either people within the colonizer mainstream in Bangladesh or the settler colonialism system in Canada.

### ***Story of “Kick You Out”***

As an international graduate student in a university in the United States, I arrived with hope, determination, and a scholarship contingent upon working as a research assistant (RA) in the international student office. I was thrilled by this opportunity to learn and grow. From the outset, I made every effort to adapt to the new system, even as I faced subtle and overt reminders that I was “less than” in the eyes of the institution.

The international office coordinator, who was from the White community and lacked lived experience as an international student, carried an air of superiority that shaped my entire experience. Their condescending attitude often framed my scholarship as an act of charity rather than a recognition of my academic achievements. Each interaction was peppered with remarks about how “different” and “better” the United States was compared to my home country and my immigrant community, as though I should be grateful for the privilege of being there. Despite these microaggressions, I tried to focus on learning, even as the coordinator’s behavior began to erode my mental health and academic performance.

Feeling isolated and desperate for support, I decided to seek advice from the dean. As I entered the dean’s office, I was met with a cold and formal atmosphere. I began explaining my situation, hoping for understanding or guidance, but I was immediately interrupted with a stern warning: “Slow down, or I’ll kick you out.” I froze in shock. Those words—“kick you out”—were more than a threat; they were a declaration of power that left me feeling silenced, dehumanized, and deeply traumatized.

This moment solidified my understanding of the unspoken rule within settler colonialism systems: if you speak up against racism or injustice, you risk being erased, expelled, or ostracized. The phrase “kick you out” became an invisible, ever-present spectre in my mind. It was not just about that room or that interaction; it was a systemic reminder that I was an outsider in a structure designed to exclude me. The trauma lingers, surfacing every time I encounter injustice or feel the weight of being “othered.”

### ***Story of “You Are Not Canadian Immigrant Enough”***

After completing my graduate studies, my spouse and I applied for Canadian skilled immigration with two master’s degrees and a PhD each—mine from the United States and Bangladesh, and my spouse’s from Sweden and Norway in Women and Gender Studies. Despite our qualifications, we were saddened to learn that our international degrees were not fully recognized in Canada. The

settlement services recommended a three-month employment training program as a pathway to Canadian integration.

The program was a surreal experience. For a week, we were taught how to greet others and shake hands “properly.” Curious and slightly amused, I asked the instructor, “Most of us here are skilled immigrants—doctors, engineers, social workers—don’t you think we know how to greet and shake hands?” The response was a pointed gesture toward a photo of two white individuals in formal attire shaking hands, accompanied by the remark, “Yes, you know, but not the Canadian way.” When I pressed further, asking what made a handshake “Canadian,” the instructor replied, “Your ways of greeting are not like Canadian. To get a good job, you need to learn the civilized Canadian way.” This interaction was a stark reminder of how racialized immigrants are made to feel inadequate in Canada. Despite our education and skills, we were deemed “uncivilized” and forced into a performative assimilation. The three-month training program concluded, and we waited eagerly for job opportunities. A month later, I received a call from the immigrant settlement center. The mentor’s enthusiastic tone made me hopeful, but my optimism quickly faded when they informed me of a job offer—a position at a coffee shop for an hourly minimum wage.

I was not shocked by the offer of a coffee shop job; I was shocked by the irony of spending three months learning how to shake hands only to be funnelled into menial labor. This was not about job preparation; it was about reinforcing a narrative that we, as racialized immigrants, were not enough—our education, experience, and identities were insufficient.

Although I ultimately declined the job offer after being admitted to a Canadian university for a PhD program with a scholarship, the experience left a lasting impression. It reminded me that the settler colonialism systems governing immigration and employment are designed to strip us of our dignity, our qualifications, and our identities. We are made to internalize that we are “others”—never quite enough, always striving for acceptance in a system that demands our assimilation while denying us recognition. These stories are not isolated incidents but reflections of systemic injustices that racialized immigrants and international students face daily. They are reminders of how settler colonialism power operates to marginalize, silence, and traumatize. By sharing these narratives, I reclaim my voice and assert that we are enough—our experiences, knowledge, and identities matter.

## Story of “You Are Not Academic Enough”

Despite excelling throughout my academic journey—earning prestigious scholarships, completing my PhD, receiving a prestigious Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship, and securing a prestigious position—I have often felt that my presence in academia is seen as an anomaly. As a racialized scholar, I am constantly reminded, directly and indirectly, that I do not truly belong to the institution where I work. Here, I recount two stories that exemplify this exclusion and the emotional toll it takes.

### ***Story of “Sorry to Lose You”***

As a faculty member, I have consistently been a top researcher in my department and in my faculty, securing grants and making impactful contributions. Yet, my personal life has been marked by financial strain. Supporting my family on a single income was nearly impossible, forcing us to rely on food banks and free food distributions.

My spouse, a highly qualified scholar with a PhD and a federally funded postdoctoral fellowship, struggled to find employment in our new city. Hoping to explore opportunities for her, I met with a higher institutional leader and explained our situation. I spoke candidly about the financial challenges we faced and emphasized my spouse’s qualifications for academic or administrative roles. The responsible institutional leader listened patiently and responded, “I know your spouse very well. She is highly qualified. However, we don’t have anything for her at this time. We would be sorry to lose you if you decided to leave.” The phrase “we would be sorry to lose you” was not reassuring—it felt like a veiled threat. It left me frozen, unsure of how to respond. I managed to say, “Please let me know if anything comes up,” but I felt an immediate need to end the conversation and retreat. Instead of feeling supported, I felt vulnerable and isolated. The meeting reinforced a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity. As a racialized scholar, I realized that no matter how well I performed or contributed to the institution, I would always have to live with the uncertainty of whether I truly belonged. These incidents, among others, have left me questioning the institution’s commitment to inclusivity and belonging. The university’s motto, “You Belong Here,” feels hollow when faculty like me are made to feel fearful and unwelcome. If I, as a faculty member with significant accomplishments, feel unsafe voicing my needs, I can only imagine the experiences of racialized students navigating these same spaces.

I have come to understand that this systemic exclusion is not about individual incidents but about the structural barriers that exist for racialized people in academia. No matter how much we achieve, we are continually reminded that we must live with fear and uncertainty. For racialized scholars, the message is clear: excellence is not enough. We are constantly navigating the unspoken rules of belonging in spaces that were not designed for us.

### ***Story of Respect the “Furniture”***

One spring day, after a long and tiring day at work, I found myself resting in a quiet sitting area at the university. The space was nearly empty, and I closed my eyes briefly to recuperate. Moments later, a security officer approached me and abruptly touched my shoulder. “Sir, you cannot close your eyes and sit here,” they said. Startled, I stood up, confused and worried that I had done something wrong.

“Did I do anything wrong?” I asked.

“Yes,” they replied, “you’re closing your eyes. You can’t do that. You need to respect the furniture.”

I looked around at the completely empty seating area and replied, “I’ve never heard of this rule before. Are you saying this to me or to everyone?”

The officer’s tone shifted sharply. “Are you planning to play the race card here?”

I was taken aback. “Where is that coming from?” I asked.

“You just played it,” they replied.

At that moment, I felt an overwhelming sense of fear. I knew that speaking up too much could lead to negative consequences for me, as it often does for racialized individuals in these spaces. I carefully de-escalated the situation, saying, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make this complicated. I won’t close my eyes while sitting here. Thank you.”

While I managed to avoid further conflict, the incident left me shaken. It was a reminder of the invisible rules that racialized people are expected to follow—rules that others might not even encounter. The phrase “respect the furniture” became emblematic of the ways my presence in this space was questioned and surveilled. More than that, it symbolized the unspoken threat: “You do not belong here.”

These experiences are a stark reminder of the emotional and psychological toll that comes with being “othered” in academia. Despite my achievements, I am often left asking myself, “Am I academic enough?” But the deeper question is not about my abilities—it is about the systems that refuse to see me as enough.

## Discussion

Decolonizing land-based identity requires a deep and committed engagement with the intersections of settler colonialism histories, land relations, and identity formation. For a land-based researcher from Bangladesh and a settler of color and decolonial scholar in Canada, this process is not only a scholarly responsibility but also an act of healing and resistance. The settler colonialism processes that severed me from my land, culture, and spirituality necessitate a deliberate and transformative approach to reclaiming these lost connections. This discussion explores why decolonizing land-based identity is crucial for personal and collective healing, emphasizing the roles of responsibility, interconnectedness, and the transformative potential of decolonial methodologies.

### Responsibility as Land-Based Researchers and Scholars

Reclaiming my spiritual relationships with the land has been an act of self-determination, resilience, and healing from the traumas inflicted by the colonizing status quo. The responsibility of decolonizing land-based identity emerges from recognizing how settler colonialism structures have systematically

severed relational ways of knowing. As a land-based researcher from Bangladesh, this responsibility is deeply personal and political. Settler colonialism education systems in Bangladesh deliberately dismantled Indigenous and relational learning rooted in ceremony and spirituality, replacing them with Eurocentric, hierarchical frameworks that disconnected people from their ancestral lands and lifeways (Battiste, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012). These imposed structures fragmented collective identities, replacing the deeply interconnected *we* with an individualized, extractive worldview (Simpson, 2014).

Similarly, as a settler of color scholar in Canada, my responsibility includes acknowledging my complex position within settler colonial systems—both as someone affected by racial marginalization and as a beneficiary of settler colonialism. This positionality demands a commitment to dismantling settler colonialism hierarchies while actively centering Indigenous sovereignty and land-based knowledge systems (Regan, 2010).

Both perspectives share a foundation in relational accountability, emphasizing reciprocity, respect, and the collective well-being of communities and lands. Decolonization, then, is not only an intellectual project but a lived practice—one that requires challenging dominant settler colonialism epistemologies in academic spaces and advocating for the resurgence of diverse, land-based ways of knowing and being (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

### Healing Through Decolonization

The process of decolonizing land-based identity is inherently a journey of healing. For the racialized researcher, reclaiming land-based practices offers a pathway to reconnect with cultural roots and counteract the erasure perpetuated by settler colonialism systems. Ceremonies, rituals, and relational teachings rooted in the land are not only acts of resistance but also sources of spiritual and emotional restoration (Alfred, 2005; Cajete, 2000). These practices reaffirm interconnectedness with all beings, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose.

For the settler of color scholar, healing involves confronting the trauma of displacement and erasure experienced by Indigenous peoples while navigating their own histories of migration and settler colonialism impact. Engaging in decolonial methodologies such as story-sharing allows for the creation of spaces where marginalized voices are validated and honored (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009). Participating in these practices, scholars can contribute to collective healing processes that challenge the dominance of settler colonialism narratives.

This paper highlights how healing is both a personal and collective journey. It requires critical learning of the interconnectedness of humans, land, and other beings, moving away from individualistic paradigms toward relational ways of being (Marker, 2019; Simpson, 2017). This transformation is not merely an academic exercise but a profound expression of love, care, and responsibility toward the land and its inhabitants.

## Challenges and Transformative Potential

Decolonizing land-based identity is fraught with challenges, particularly within academic and societal structures that uphold settler colonialism hierarchies. For the racialized researcher in Canada, these challenges include navigating educational systems that prioritize Western knowledge while devaluing local and Indigenous epistemologies (Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The erasure of land-based identities through these systems perpetuates feelings of alienation and displacement.

For the settler of color scholar, the challenges involve addressing the tensions between their positionality as both marginalized and complicit within settler colonial frameworks. This requires a continuous interrogation of privilege and an unwavering commitment to allyship with Indigenous communities. My personal decolonial stories illustrate how these challenges manifest in academic spaces, where racialized scholars often face microaggressions and systemic exclusion (Dei, 1996; Marker, 2019).

Despite these obstacles, I learned that my transformative potential of decolonizing land-based identity lies in its ability to disrupt settler colonialism structures and create spaces for diverse ways of knowing. The article underscores the power of story-sharing as a decolonial methodology that prioritizes relational knowledge and personal narratives (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Story-sharing is ceremony because it enacts relational accountability, renews responsibilities, and situates identity within place. Taken together, this framework brings conceptual and methodological clarity by showing how reflective narratives operate simultaneously as decolonial praxis and as pathways for healing. It also provides a model for other researchers and communities seeking to integrate story-sharing and ceremony into their own work. Through storytelling, scholars can resist colonial erasure, foster solidarity, and contribute to movements for decolonization and justice.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on this article, I recognize the critical act of reclaiming land-based identity as both a personal and political act of healing and resistance. Through reflective story-sharing, I explore how settler colonialism education, governance, and epistemologies have severed Indigenous and land-based peoples, including myself, from cultural and spiritual roots. In doing so, I challenge settler colonialism hierarchies by centering relational accountability, reciprocity, and land-based knowledge systems.

I use decolonial methodologies, particularly storytelling, as both an act of inquiry and activism. Weaving personal narratives with critical analysis, I make complex colonial critiques accessible while reinforcing the lived realities of land-based knowledge suppression. The personal nature of my stories strengthens my argument, making the process of reclaiming identity tangible, emotional, and deeply resonant.

However, I acknowledge the ongoing resistance faced in reclaiming land-based identity within settler colonialism academic and social structures. While I highlight these struggles, I realize I could further explore strategies for sustaining these efforts in hostile environments. Additionally, while my work serves as a model for others seeking to decolonize their identities, providing more concrete steps or community-based frameworks would enhance its applicability. This work is not just about theory but about lived experience and survival. My journey of reclaiming land-based identity is an offering to others navigating decolonization, demonstrating how this process fosters both individual healing and collective resurgence.

The responsibility of decolonizing land-based identity is a critical act of healing and transformation for a land-based researcher from my home country and a settler of color anti-racist scholar in Canada. Attending to specificity—whether in place, ritual, memory, or more-than-human relations—strengthens this contribution by showing how story-sharing is both personal and translatable. For others, this offers a way to engage decolonial praxis that is not about adopting a universal template but about carefully situating one's own responsibilities, relations, and contexts.

For a racialized researcher, decolonizing identity is a reclamation of cultural roots, spirituality, and relational practices that settler colonialism systems sought to erase. As a settler of color scholar, it is my strength and challenge to settler colonialism and a commitment to advancing anti-racist and decolonial efforts. Together, these perspectives showcase the transformative potential of decolonization as both a personal and collective journey.

Centering relational accountability, healing, and decolonial methodologies, this work contributes to broader conversations on decolonization, advocating for systems and practices that honor land-based identities and knowledge. This process is not merely an act of resistance but a profound expression of love, care, and responsibility—an essential step toward creating a more just and sustainable world.

This article shows how this research may be understood as a ceremonial story-sharing framework that guides researchers and communities in decolonial praxis. It unfolds through four interconnected movements: (1) situating land as a living relation; (2) surfacing lived stories that reveal how colonial systems shape and sever identities; (3) engaging those stories collectively through reciprocity, listening, and ceremony to generate relational accountability; and (4) transforming these insights into community-led actions for healing and systems change. This iterative process—reflection, ceremony, sharing, and renewal—positions story-sharing as both method and ethical orientation. It invites others to locate their own responsibilities within their lands and relationships, rather than adopting a universal template. In doing so, it offers a translatable model for integrating ceremony and storytelling into research that seeks to decolonize identity and reimagine relationships of land, knowledge, and justice.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Ethics statement

No formal ethics review was required, as this paper draws solely on the author's (my) own decolonial autobiographical and land-based reflections. I have carefully protected personal and contextual details to avoid identifying others, and I honour cultural teachings by sharing only what I am responsible and permitted to share.

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