

### On Writing “Ghost Hunt” and Preparing My Own Spirit



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We who are Indigenous have been erased in the academy, Hollywood, education, politics, and technology. Any space that you can imagine, we do not exist because oftentimes, even if you find us there, we have been interpreted, wrangled, rearranged, and crafted to fit Euro American ideologies, even though most often those are entire fabrications. In the past few hundreds of years, we must imagine our own futures, because it was presumed we would not have futures. In fact, it was even desired that we have no futures. In an annual report from the Commissioner of Indian affairs dated October 24, 1881, he states, “There is no one who has been a close observer of Indian history and the effect of contact of Indians with civilization who is not well satisfied that one of two things must eventually take place, to wit, either civilization or extermination of the Indian. Savage and civilized life cannot live and prosper on the same ground. One of the two must die.” He recognizes here a long history of settlers wanting us exterminated. Erased. There is no white savior then or now. What they didn’t count on for their futures is that we are still here.

Some of us are working hard to take the walk back to our communities after erasures have taken over. My great grandfather was ashamed of his Seneca identity and walked away. My desire to kick down the hefty walls and all the boxes courses through my blood. He may have felt shame, and hopes that I won’t, yet I too, am left shamed all of the time for being too white-coded, for being too Indigenous-minded, for being too sensitive and empathic, for being a woman, for working on genocide and truth and reconciliation for Native American genocide, for being a woman desiring a family and lost without one, for having dreams, and for speaking truths. It seems I cannot thrive in the eyes of others no matter which part of me I assert. Someone will always have something negative to say. I sometimes wonder how we can truly be ourselves here on land that is ours, that has been stolen, that is continuously being colonized. And then I remember community teachings. We do because our ancestors hover there, with us, wanting different lives for us, wanting our futures to be stronger and less trauma informed. Wanting our true sovereignty.

In this erasure state, I feel like a ghost sometimes, drifting there right in front of folks, but never really seen unless I move an object valuable to others. When I realize this, a different future begins appearing to me, but only after I understand the past histories that have been forcibly removed from my education. In graduate school, I work with Indigenous mentors and accomplice mentors, who assign Indigenous-centered texts and critical work from emerging BIPOC scholars which all help me turn a pivotal point of what will be many of my own shifts and changes.

The community of “Ghost Hunt” begins with an entirely different character, first. I wrote a separate novel chapter where a mother searches for her daughter during the boarding school

period. She comes to me while listening to Indigenous female writers who include female leads in their work. I have already been centering women as the heroines to their tales, something I still don't see often in American Indian stories. I am not surprised then when a mother knocks within my brain, entreating me to write, to tell her story. The first chapter, of what would years later become a novel, involves this mother uncovering the bones of her daughter. I can't stop writing her story until it's finished—multiple flash pieces upon flash pieces challenging what it means to craft psychological breaks of a character who remains both broken and hopeful that her daughter is somehow alive.

But her daughter is a Lost One.

Lost Ones are children who never return home from boarding schools centered on forcibly educating American Indians to assimilation and stolen minds. I wonder why I am uncovering bones in this dark, dark basement and making this character enter the worst moment of her life. That's when I realize that I wrote this particular chapter to teach those who don't know our traumas exactly how those emotions rise and fall and tear apart. To show how trauma appears in full, daily, we are still breathing, form. Because the trauma doesn't take us down how settlers want those breaks to occur. At least not most of us. That complete realization doesn't occur to me for several more years of working on this novel.

Shortly after the spring when this first chapter and the mother's character pours out of my pen, I spend a summer week in the archives at Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I work between the archives at Dickinson College, the Cumberland County Historical Society, and the War College. All of the people in these spaces are extraordinarily nice. But I'm not sure they know what it means to thumb through pages, photos, interviews, and student newspapers aimed at extinction and erasure.

I notice that many of the students' voices are either left out, unbalanced, or reframed through white perspectives. The newspaper is controlled and edited by the "man on the bandstand." Letters home are closely monitored for inappropriate complaints and comments about the school. When DeWitt Smith III later completes interviews throughout the late '70s he only interviews three folks related to direct student experiences: John Alonzo, a student at Carlisle, and Mr. and Mrs. George Sarracino, both of whose fathers were students. We also hear from many white community members. All of this makes me feel more and more uncomfortable, including the cold, orange and brown 70s inspired modern architecture of the buildings I have to sit in to read such materials. At that time, archives are at the very beginnings of digitizing this boarding school collection. Now, you can scroll through these files at home in your own space. Back then, it's against the rules to seek to take the pages anywhere but in the specific rooms for viewing. I understand the idea around protecting vulnerable documents—vulnerable to decay and oils in our hands. What I can't comprehend, and still don't, is that we have to ask permission to do so—that this is considered keeping documents safe. When were those students kept safe and valued? Parents have been promised that. And of course, the schools break those promises.

On the last day of my research, I visit the barracks where the first ever government-run boarding school had been converted into school grounds in 1879—built to kill us, but yet to save our humanity. It isn't our humanity that needs saving. The space has been turned back to a war barracks after the school closes in 1918. I am glad to be outside, but the discomfort doesn't leave my body. Just at the barracks' entrance stands a graveyard from the time-period of the boarding school where both students and other staff are buried. Mind you, this has been moved from the very back of the grounds. I still wonder why they had to disturb those bodies. Why move these vulnerable, sacred children?

Moving Indigenous bodies or bulldozing over our burial grounds is not new to us. The #NoDAPL movement received attention for a summer, fall, and part of a winter, then disappeared, even though digging on Indigenous burial grounds against our permission continues. I think that our bodies are ignored because they can't see our spirits. We then again become ghosts. There are still important energies and ancestral knowledge tied to those graves, however.

I notice a light in Carlisle at the barracks that surrounds the area, even though clouds cover the sky. That's why the bones glow at the end of this story, which I only recognize now. I also notice dream catchers and small bags of tobacco by the stone entrance of the cemetery. Someone has been looking after these children. Tobacco bags also sit along many of the students' gravestones. As difficult as this experience is, I sigh in relief to see these other knowledge holders lining the space, a protectant that the children don't have while at that school. A line created of love and care which they also don't have on these grounds until now, but which had certainly spread out from their communities.

I won't talk here of boarding school stories. Readers can do research on their own about Carlisle and other schools, much of which is done by other Indigenous scholars now. But I can say these were, and still are, toxic spaces. Strong ceremonies need to clear these spaces because of the harm, violence, and multitudes of atrocities that occurred here.

What I remember about the two interviews with the student survivors are their stories of friendships. Out of horror, our youth, our interrupted seven generations, make lasting relationships. Relationships that I can only hope help them through the trauma of the moment—although these could not be enough to keep the trauma from happening. It's vital to point out here that these students remember their friendships, picking strawberries, and playing ball. I try to see that while on the grounds, but I fail and can only imagine the man on the literal bandstand, a white gazebo in the middle of the grounds used to closely monitor students—a gazebo modeled after the center of a prison where prisoners are watched for misbehaving.

My walk across the grounds of the former school leads me to write "Ghost Hunt," and wondering how we move forward to begin healing from boarding schools. Those characters have called out to me to place them carefully on paper and to take a similar walk with them on the grounds of a boarding school up near my home. Thus, seven characters, seven best friends,

growing up on a reservation sometime fifty years from now, have moved through my dreams and out onto my computer screen.

I am often surprised at what does and doesn't emotionally and mentally impact me in the moment—how I am able to let some stories work through me, but not break me. I would only realize years later how rocked my body is from visiting the school grounds. I am shaky afterwards and I experience this feeling of not wanting to leave, but being pushed bodily to go immediately after walking around the entire space. I cry while watching a documentary on the schools the year previously, but I can't cry here. I take those stories, energies, and images in, straight in, and they sit in my body.

Writing "Ghost Hunt" does not release toxins from my body. That would be too easy for this work. For this depth of trauma and loss. However, the story then unrolls from my fingers quickly, making words pop up as the pages scroll on. When visiting Carlisle, I know there are secrets there under the dirt and along the horizon. I can see, too, that we will never know the whole story.

During my research, I find that there is a mass grave site of now 82 known graves in Florida at Dozier School for Boys, a place that abused those from infant to teenage years, of both young white and black men. All I need to know is that the US has one mass grave that they have hidden, to know that there is a large capillary system of lies through the bedrock of bones, dirt, and decaying buildings across the country. The US is built on the belief that if you can control human bodies, whether through education, prison, slavery, cheap labor, laws, or religion, then you can also have control of the land. But nature doesn't concede to this kind of relationship. It's easier to hide something when you literally bury the secret. And the secret is that children are forced to horribly alter their identity and their minds in ways their bodies can't always survive. Those schools kill the children who die under their "care" because our Lost Ones are never cared for at all. Because remember, these students aren't seen as human yet. That has to be beaten into them whether verbally or physically. Let me return to that letter: "Savage and civilized life cannot live and prosper on the same ground. One of the two must die." Die either by assimilation or by body.

And so the "Ghost Hunt" character Brenner creates a quest for his friends to bring them together. He is that elusive character that takes adventure to extremely strange levels. But he doesn't want to do this particular adventure without his friends. Throughout the novel from which this story derives, he goes off on his own self-discovery without them or the readers and I think he knows this is that last moment before they part for a while. As much as he continues to call this a ghost hunt, Brenner really knows that this is simply a label which means family members. He wants to connect to his ancestors just as much as some of the other characters who are hiding this from themselves. Others of them don't need to connect here because they can in other ways, they just don't know it yet. Some need the tangible quest, while others will journey in their dreams.

But in the here and now of this story, they are in shock. Shock and first reactions will look different for everyone, just as it does for me. Some are angry, some sad, some numb, some oblivious. There are a wide range of emotions when grieving the Lost Ones. I was numb then. Am

numb still sometimes. I see and hear so much violence against Indigenous bodies that if I don't let quite a bit of those stories ride over me in those first moments, I wouldn't still be here. But don't think that means I never feel the violence reverberate through me.

Late at night, I sometimes rock with the pain, pain brought out by reading other stories, or hearing other stories, or simply by being alone. These are often tears and shakes. The anger, which turns to rage during Covid and the responses of unwoke folks to the activism and the major health crisis, enters my body too, just more often than it used to. I rock with that emotion, too, and rage and anger rise when people don't understand, when they say and do racist things and then mask their harm with liberal ideals, and when they refuse to do the work and dig settler colonialism out of themselves. The scar from the digging will heal, but they don't want to feel the small, biting pain that comes with the digging.

They will never know microaggressions and that constant biting, searing pain which marks each day that those like them create by being unsafe spaces which cause harm, and sometimes are abusive. So then, I'm angry again, and then they do something again and I find it harder and harder to let those moments roll off of my back where I say nothing.

When there is a war scene in a movie, I sometimes imagine that is us conquering settler colonialism for good. Until I return to reality where we are erased from Hollywood. And then I become even more angry, and I take my imaginary self and I re-create Hollywood our way. I am one of those heroines on the front lines, charging through the fray ready to stop at nothing to rid the world of all its terror and violence and Twisted Mind. Someone once said to me, it's loving to tell an oppressor that they are being violent. Fighting back is not succumbing to their ways because the fight takes care of us and can be protective.

And so these characters emerge and they take that fight on for the future. In order to do so, in order to push them forward, they must first see the trauma from a different angle, down under the dirt, from their ancestors. This discovery will become their motivation, much like it becomes mine.

For readers experiencing only this story here in this special edition, this discovery is our daily tangle with managing trauma and being our resilient selves anyway. We step in, we step out. It's not always that smooth or complete.

I step back in when I hear about Kamloops.

Years after writing these seven characters and their first chapter, someone says, "Did you hear?" I then find myself sweeping through news articles. I'm not just finding the stories in Canadian newspapers, as I hear a week after the discovery. The US reports this news, too. 215 bodies radar detected in Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, the village where Kamloops Indian Residential School, one of the largest in Canada, is located. And I'm shocked.

I'm not shocked at the discovery. My story foresaw this occurring—including the detectors—

just perhaps not right now. I do, however, have a momentary retreat to awe. Awe at those doing the work. Awe at ensuring the news picks up the story. I *am* shocked that the US has an ear on the story. Maybe they are comfortable writing about the mass graves because the discovery isn't in the US. US newspapers don't mention then that there were other discoveries here, that people have been working to detect similar sites on US boarding school grounds—including unmarked graves at Carlisle. A few spaces will later report this, but the part about the US does not make the major news channels. Instead, they continue to question Canadian residential schools.

When something is far enough away that you can't imagine it on your own land, critiquing those actions becomes very easy and there seems an anger that goes along with the critique.

But this trauma doesn't run through their blood.

I hear many stories from other Indigenous folks. I believe all of them and take their words in as precious beings that deserve careful and kind care. I have heard several stories already about Indigenous writers and teachers encountering folks who had thought "all the Indians had died." People simply walk up to them and tell them they can't possibly exist because history classes or movies tell them otherwise. I have yet to experience that myself until a few years into teaching.

One day, a student sits in my office discussing her paper. She has just been home visiting for either fall break or Thanksgiving.

"I brought up our class to my family," she says. She explains that there are a number of older relatives gathering for a meal. "My dad said that he thought all the Indians had died a long time ago. He didn't understand why we were studying them."

A chill runs up my back and then I pinch myself so that she can see. "Well, I'm still here, so..."

She laughs. "I know. I tried to tell him. But he wouldn't believe me."

We move on to discuss her paper topic. But that moment remains embedded in my skin and my brain. I already know this is a common experience and I don't feel alone. But yet, this is a common experience to be *so* invisible.

These moments are pricks to the skin. Hearing about Kamloops is a prick to the skin. Hearing US newspapers ignore their own history is another prick. Making major revisions to a department letter about the discovery is an even deeper prick that bleeds. There are these scars all along my body and my brain that come from the constant and consistent breaches into trauma. When relegated to a ghost, a disappearing trick, there is this moment of others looking right past the problem. You see, a ghost is still there, still present, but unless the spirit can move objects, that presence can't be seen by most people. That is what microaggressions do—they turn us into ghostly apparitions. Our experiences can't possibly happen, can't possibly be racist, can't possibly be homophobic, can't possibly be narcissistic, according to those outside this realm of injustice. By my very existence I prove that the vanishing Indian is *the* myth told by outsiders rather than

our stories being the myths. When I make choices to ensure that I am seen, I risk a sense of safety that I create and what I want from that is respect and to be believed. Those are the first steps in reversing erasure and invisibility.

How do I prepare my spirit for injustices then? I can have someone brush me off. Or I can smudge myself. Or I can go out by the beach or the woods and let nature soak into my skin. But honestly, there is not always a way to prepare. I recently speak with another Indigenous artist. Kamloops weaves into our conversation because this is a steady presence for all of us right now. She has offered to help write her university's letter addressing the continued discoveries of mass graves. And she wondered the exact same thing, how do you prepare to enter that darkness?

As we move through our conversation, the lines of connection we already have deepened just then and I can see the lines strengthening. She then suddenly says, "We're preparing every day." By rising and meeting the day and by living our own community's ways, we are preparing. We *have* to because we experience the pricks every day. Maybe, too, we center ourselves. Maybe we have a conversation like this. Maybe we put up boundaries. Maybe we say no to something. Maybe we speak up. But it is our focus on our community that guides us through.

If you felt unprepared to read the short story, then that seems appropriate, that seems realistic. No one deserves trauma. There cannot be silence around the experience. People unprepared still need to read the story and move through trauma with the characters. Otherwise, how else do we understand except through story? Many of us don't live in the trauma every moment. Settlers cannot have that power over us and don't. However, genocide and erasure lives and breathes around us because settler minds are still present. That's what needs preparing. That's what needs shedding in all of us—the ways of genocide and the inching around that evil does in our everyday lives. So I continue to write the erasure, the harm, and the trauma out of me, out of my characters, and out of my community. New worlds can then be born and scaffolded for future generations.

Students who attended Kamloops didn't know where their friends had gone. One day, they simply disappear. Their friends presume that they have escaped or been sent home. I cannot imagine finding out they have died and that this was kept from me. A future pre-apocalypse world then is the only setting where I think, non-Indigenous people might understand such a discovery.

I struggle to find the words to describe what it means to have Kamloops stream across the news. To have the Lost Ones found and brought home. To have non-Indigenous people, including my dean, talking about the discovery now. Right here before the future. To have people asking what residential schools are.

We are in a moment—the kind of moment that if we stop talking about the schools, they will bury us again. They will put our bones underneath dirt to become one with the dirt so that we cannot be found. So that our voices are choking on the minerals. What they don't know is that we see these minerals as relatives. That's why they find, and will continue to find, our Lost Ones. That's why news keeps breaking of even more mass graves found because the chain has begun.

When I finished writing this story, I did not feel complete or fulfilled. And it's okay if readers don't either. The novel these characters move through fulfills this in some ways. However, as I write more and more about the futurity of my community, I realize this is a series, a continuing on, a fighting for daily sovereignty. And I'm still figuring out how we get that sovereignty for our land and for our sacred sites, when in reality, we already have sovereignty for our bodies. You can't mind control us anymore. We are figuring out that you wanted and still want us dead in both body and mind. And I don't know about you, but that will make many survive the unimaginable. White futurity is now. Our futurity is the future. Which by the way, the future begins tomorrow.

A few summers ago, I visit a campus that had been a former boarding school. When I pull in, the air held this lightness to the movement of the trees. The sky is a pale blue with a few clouds in the center. Students have talked about seeing figures and hearing voices in the old dormitory. A colleague says that she saw the students in the windows sometimes. Briefly. They feel their spirits have been caught in a limbo they can't escape because of the traumas they experience.

The previous year before I arrive there, a community member holds a ceremony for those Lost Ones. The grounds when I am there are quiet until I meet with my colleague. We catch up and have a conversation with another colleague. As we leave to go to lunch, she points out a few places in the courtyard, including a statue of Grandmother and two children created to honor the past, present, and future of the many Native American peoples who attended the boarding school that once stood there.

In that courtyard, I hear children laughing and playing—children who are not physically there. Some of them stay behind to protect other Indigenous students attending school there. They gift me right there with their laughter and their love. We can all learn from them. The system isn't made for our healthy passage through education. It was and is still made for our demise. A few weeks after I leave, a Native American girl has committed suicide and counselors attempt to offer other Indigenous students help.

I recognize that the characters in this particular story are not in a world without traces of settler colonialism. I suppose that's because at that point in my writing, I couldn't imagine far beyond now, until I wrote this novel. I experience settler colonialism every day. It's simply right there hanging in front of my face as I work in the Ivory Towers. I have to labor through the trauma with the characters before fully seeing that there are other worlds, most right now in the liminal spaces in our minds, where there is no settler colonialism.

The story must go on. And the characters must persevere. And so I continue to write through the anger and the sadness and the passionate beliefs in our futures. And these characters will continue to hunt down their histories, live the present, and fight evil with the resilience that only the now can build. There is both resilience and perseverance here in what I have written, and in what other Indigenous writers craft. Our future visions that we've been having in our re-imaginings of speculative works are not so far off. They are right here. Waiting for us to enact them. Waiting for the rise-up. Which my characters will do.