

## **Tabitha Robin: The Land Feeds Us**

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### **On Land Acknowledgments**

Land acknowledgments are so important. I am the first-generation Indigenous person in my family to get to explore my culture out in the open. In my father's generation and my grandmother's generation, those were still the generations of Residential School, of child apprehension through things such as the Sixties Scoop, so my family was often hidden and spent a lot of time running, sometimes to escape further oppression. So for me when I give a land acknowledgement, I'm always aware my ancestors couldn't be here. They couldn't be here but I can be here today.

For me, teaching and learning and sharing about Indigenous Food Sovereignty is very much about teaching people how to consider the relationships that we have to food, consider the relationships that we have to land, and continue the process of unreckoning in order that we may start to tackle some of the injustices and inequities that we know Indigenous peoples are still experiencing today. So a land acknowledgment means the acknowledgment of all of the bloodshed that happened on these lands. That bloodshed happened in order that colonization could continue. That bloodshed happened so that there could be farms and stores and hotels and businesses. That bloodshed happened in order for my people not to be here.

And so I like to take that moment to acknowledge the land. In my case, I also acknowledge that we drink Treaty 3 water here in Winnipeg, because in 2021, we should not have any First Nations communities, we should not have any communities in Canada, that do not have access to drinking water – certainly not a community that supplies Winnipeg with drinking water and yet does not have the ability to access their own. That is deeply troubling, and I would be lying if I said that those processes weren't a further perpetuation of colonialism.

So I want to acknowledge that, because it took a lot of people to get me here to this point, and it took a lot of loss and a lot of hardship, and these lands have experienced loss and they have experienced hardship. The good news is, there is so much beauty in my culture and so -- Tânisî.

### **On Indigenous Food Sovereignty**

My family comes from Treaty 5 in Northern Manitoba. I'm a mixed ancestry Mushkegowuk. My family is also Icelandic and Irish. In fact, they met fishing the waters of Lake Winnipeg. It was a very difficult time, coming here from Iceland and adjusting to the changed climate, geography, landscape, soils. I grew up with an acknowledgment that I wouldn't be here today without the generosity and the kind spirit of my Indigenous ancestors.

Sometimes I joke that perhaps one of my legacies will be that I am *the hunger scholar*. So let me talk a little bit about that. We have a very long history of how we feed as Indigenous peoples in this country. If we look at the history of starvation on the Prairies, we can see three specific and well-intentioned phases that were a means to assimilate and destroy my people. That begins, of

course, with the deliberate eradication of keystone species such as the Bison and the Beaver. Certainly the Bison gets a lot more credit these days. We don't see the population numbers that we used to. I think most societies understand that Indigenous peoples had a specific and special relationship with the Bison. The Bison is both a keystone species to the land but also to Indigenous cultures and specifically to Cree culture.

But the loss of the Beaver, or the attempted destruction of the Beaver, is also critical in understanding a very long history of erasing the lands of people and erasing the lands of attempts for people to feed themselves. And so the reason that the Beaver was targeted is because the Beavers are, of course, the source of freshwater. And Beavers make fresh water and in fresh water, we find more food. We find plants and animals, we find roots that are used for medicine. We find ducks and geese and muskrats and otter and mink, all sorts of really important foods to be able to eat. But in erasing our history from this land, wetlands were also erased. That was one of the first major damages that was done to our land.

I think about my family in Peguis and Fisher River [First Nations in Manitoba] which experience flooding year after year after year – to which we don't see a solution in sight. Despite the sandbagging, despite the extra funds, it's not nearly enough to recover from such losses every single year. And so I think about the loss of these wetlands, and I think about this popular beaver hat, that was really the driver for the desire to have a beaver pelt. And I think about this desire to eradicate the Bison, of this desire to remove parts of the Bison to be used in industry, and I think how have we gotten our priorities so wrong. That's not what animals are for. We should know better.

### **On Residential Schools**

These concepts were further explored in Residential Schools, where further starvation occurred amongst Indigenous people. Now when we say Residential Schools we are being kind. It wasn't a school. If you read the TRC report, you know that these were essential work camps. One of the punishments that was often doled out at work camps was working in the garden. And so here you have young children – my grandmother included – who are removed from their families, their languages, their culture, and placed in schools in order “to remove the Indian from them.” But we also know that they were not fed enough, that they were malnourished, and that they experienced high rates of hunger while they were in Residential Schools.

Having to work in the garden as punishment is even more heartbreaking when you consider the fact that those children were not allowed to eat the food that was grown in the garden. That food was meant to be sold and used for the benefit of the churches that ran the Residential Schools.

### **On the Signing of Treaties**

And so we have this first wave of this deliberate eradication of our waters, of our animals species. In fact, we know from those times that our Chiefs expressed much concern. They were very concerned over the fact that they were making decisions to essentially relinquish parts of their lands, parts of what we think of as so-called Canada, in order to feed their people. So they

did enter treaty negotiations under duress and with the desire to feed their people. That took place in the form of rations. We know that those rations are not food that is designed for our bodies. So we see the prevalence of white flour and pork. Those were largely rations that were fed, and those continued into Residential Schools. These are not what our bodies are designed for, and much of the diabetes that we experience in our cultures today can be attributed to that terrible diet.

### **On Starvation**

Starvation took place in that first phase with the *deliberate* removal and an attempt to eradicate a species of not just Bison and not just Beaver but an attempt to eradicate Indigenous peoples from the land. And then we see further starvation in Residential Schools – and here, I'm not going to refer to starvation just as hunger, but as starvation of culture, starvation of language.

Further challenges occurred and further starvation occurred during the 1950s and 1960s specifically in Northern Canada. In Northern Canada, there was a great concern over the potential for Cold War, and the North was treated as a hub for research. Indigenous communities were seen as living laboratories and people as test subjects. Rather than being given food, Indigenous people were given vitamins to see how little it could take to keep them alive. An Elder shared with me recently that when we see obesity in our people today, we can trace that back to starvation – that the desire to want to eat so much food is a means to try to fortify ourselves against all of that loss, against all of that trauma and hardship and hunger.

### **On Food as Connection**

From an Indigenous point of view, food is not merely sustenance. It's not merely the things we eat in order to keep us alive. Food is life. It's land and it's love. It contains spirit. And, in fact, when we take a look at the words in the Cree language, our food is *mîcam*. *Mîcih*, to eat. And *mîcihtah*, to defecate. What this means is that we were always meant to eat food from the land with the knowledge that through our processes of eating and taking in spirit, we would release that back to the land and be part of the cycle.

Because that ultimately is what food is. Food is a connection to our ancestors. Food is a connection and the origins of our languages, our songs, our stories. It's a source of well-being. It's a communicator and a connection. And because it is so much more than the sustenance that we eat, it shouldn't be any wonder that we see the high rates of food-related diseases. Nor should it be a surprise that we see high rates of social injustices and social and health inequities that Indigenous people experience in this country. Because everything is connected. We can't take one piece away and imagine that everything will continue on. For Indigenous people it wasn't just one piece but rather a hundred years, a hundred and fifty years, two hundred years of piece after piece after piece being taken away.

### **On Reckoning and Responsibility**

When we turn to food we should do so out of love, out of comfort, out of a desire for connection. But unfortunately, we don't have the opportunity to do that. Our communities

experience food insecurity, or situations of hunger, that range anywhere from one in two individuals or households to a study done in South Indian Lake, which is a northern reserve in Manitoba, in which 100% of individuals and households reported experiencing food insecurity. These are startling numbers. But what it speaks to is that we have broken relationship.

And when I say “we,” I speak as somebody who is Cree and somebody who is also European. I contain that duality. And so I acknowledge that I have a role to play as I embark on the ways of connecting people to their food systems. Part of that role is helping people understand their own role. What does it mean to be a good ancestor? What does it mean to reckon for the past? What does it mean to undertake reparations?

In Canada, we’ve focused so much on notions of reconciliation in the last five years that we’ve forgotten there’s another part. And that is truth. We’re not done with the truths. The truths have yet to be uncovered...If we were at a point in society where we are willing and ready to undertake reconciliation, then we also have to be willing and ready to undertake hearing a lot of difficult truths.

For Indigenous people that’s the story of our lives. But we’re blessed, because our cultures have made it through. In all of my work across Canada, I have yet to visit a community where no one knows how to harvest or hunt or gather or pick medicines. It’s there. But what our job is in considering reckoning, in considering reparation, and considering reconciliation, our job has to be to take on the work of removing those barriers that get in the way. Those barriers that prevent us from being able to eat the foods of our ancestors, those barriers that prevent us from being able to step out of poverty, because there are systemic and structural barriers.

And my hope is our people will experience a personal forgiveness because it is not our fault. The situation we are currently in is not our fault. It was an entire system that was designed to destroy us.

### **On Demonstrating Gratitude**

And so what that leaves me with is considering to demonstrate and enact the values that we hold true to ourselves. In Cree culture the value of kindness and caring and sharing are upheld through our ceremonies, through our relationship, within our language. What that means for me is that when I go fishing or when I plant seeds, I do so with my tobacco. My tobacco is the reminder to me that I am connected to my culture, that I recognize the give and take of our food systems that our land is already enacting.

How do I demonstrate gratitude to the land? If we are not taking it to the point where we question our role in society and how we have collectively upheld a series of truths that have been so damaging in the history of this country, we’re in trouble.

And so I urge everyone to consider how can you demonstrate gratitude of the land, beyond writing about it, beyond talking about it. What does that look like for you? Are you on the protest line? Are you writing your MP or your MLA on a regular basis? Are you composting? Are

you considering your own consumption habits and patterns? These are so critical because we're facing further sweeping landscape changes with climate change. It's pressing down upon us. And there are thus more threats to Indigenous lives and livelihoods in our presence. And so I want to thank you for allowing me to tell you a little bit about the history of these lands, and to talk about some of the ways that I think we can move forward. Ekosi.