

INTRODUCTION

May Chazan



“Bring Her Something Sweet”

I am grateful to Anishinaabe Elder Shirley Williams for first introducing me to settler-elder Jean Koning. Shirley, member of the Bird Clan of the Ojibway and Odawa First Nations of Canada, is a Professor Emeritus of Indigenous Studies at Trent. In her 70s at the time, she was one of the first people to welcome me to Trent when I started teaching there in 2013, and she invited me to the Elders and Traditional Peoples Gathering that winter.

“Jean will have some things to share with you,” Shirley said. “After the Gathering, you visit her, bring her something sweet.”

That Elders Gathering was my first opportunity to listen to and learn from Indigenous Elders, artists, knowledge holders, and writers, both from this territory and from across Turtle Island. Born and raised in Montreal on Kanien'kehá'ka territory, I had spent the previous decade living and working intermittently between Ottawa and Durban, South Africa. I was making home anew in Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory as a 38-year-old parent, professor, and queer, white settler of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry.

My first impressions of Jean that day: her sharp wit, strong convictions, and loving welcome. I was awed by her energy, her knowledge, and her huge web of relationships. Everyone seemed to be stopping to say hello. She was 91 at the time and had been, in her words, “walking with First Peoples” for almost 50 years. I could not have known then that she still had a whole decade of life ahead, nor that I would be so lucky as to become part of it.

Eleven years later, I am creating this heartfelt little book in close collaboration with my brilliant co-conspirator, Ziysah von Bieberstein, and held by the generous contributions of Jillian Ackert, Jenn Cole, and Emma Langley. All four of these beautiful humans are artists and change-makers currently in their 30s or 40s; they are all dear friends and longtime members of my research team, each committed to intergenerational visiting, and each in relationship with Jean. My teenage daughter, Alex Hodson, artist and activist who was also in relationship with Jean, offered the illustration of Jean's late-life journey with my research collective, *Aging Activisms* (page 8-9). This journey included countless cups of tea, over which Jean and I shared hugs, tears, laughs, stories, and revelations. There

were major life transitions as well: a move into assisted living, an archive of life works, and a goodbye at a palliative bed.

Visiting Jean is equal parts about Jean—her life and the stories she shared—and about the practice of visiting. I understand visiting as an emotionally and ethically complex research practice and a radical, intergenerational, anti-capitalist, decolonial commitment to making better worlds. It is through the practice of visiting that my research team came to know Jean and to build the trust needed to hear the reflections that we have featured in this book.

In 2015, Jean said this to me: “If there is one message I want to get across before I die, it is that we white settlers need to learn to listen to First Peoples.” I have since discovered that she had been expressing this sentiment consistently over decades in her articles and blog posts, and with all who crossed her path. The book’s subtitle, *Learning to Listen on Colonized Land*, reflects this teaching. It also reflects what I learned to do through the many hours of visiting with Jean. Listening to and with Jean was slow, deep, and often unsettling. It required me to confront my own ways of knowing; to set aside the capitalist time pressures in my life; and to sit with my own grief and longing. Listening to Jean, and being listened to by her, was transformative; it showed me that listening to each other is how we make better futures.

“If there is one message I want to get across before I die, it is that we white settlers need to learn to listen to First Peoples.”

- Jean Koning, 2015

Belonging to Our Work Together

In the first year of my friendship with Jean, we shared many cups of tea in her apartment, and quite a few chocolate chip cookies too. Initially, we talked a lot about books. She had me reading a steady stream of Indigenous authors writing about sovereign futures: Audra Simpson, Glen Coulthard, Taiaiake Alfred, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. We also talked about the news, our families, and various community events. Jean asked me so many questions, and she listened deeply to my answers.

Jean had spent half a century listening to First Peoples and struggling alongside them, at a time when few white people were. Still, she was adamant that she could not tell me what First Peoples thought (beyond happily assigning me a reading list). One morning in 2014, Jean asked me to record her saying this, in case I should ever decide to write a book about her:

My disclaimer is that when I am speaking *of* First Peoples, I am not speaking *for* First Peoples. I am speaking from my own unique position of having had the privilege of walking with First Peoples and about my understanding of what I have learned. I have had opportunities and relationships that most white Canadians will never have, and I am very privileged for that. So I have something to share about our relationships with First Peoples, but I can only ever tell you my story, what I have been learning.

Despite this disclaimer, Jean knew she had something to offer future generations. I knew it too.

I was at a particular junction in my own life at that time. I had spent the better part of the previous decade overseas, working closely with grandmother activists in South Africa. So, when I moved to Nogojiwanong in 2013 to take up a research position at Trent, I was only beginning to engage with the upswell of new writing on Indigenous resurgence movements and Indigenous-settler relations on Turtle Island.

At Trent, I was immediately introduced to artists, community organizers, students, Elders, and academics—Indigenous and settler—who were dreaming and making decolonial futures. Ziysah, in their 30s when we met, was one of my first friends and collaborators in this community. Like me, Ziysah is a queer parent, community organizer, and settler of Ashkenazi Jewish descent. In 2013, they offered me their understanding that social justice requires a decolonial approach, and that the work of decolonization would require me to understand my own ancestry. I soon learned that this meant embarking on the kind of deep self-reflection Jean modelled, including understanding my own complicity in Canada's "settler problem." This approach would become integral to my research, teaching, and community work.

"We settlers are the real issue," Jean would say, calling out her British colonial mindset. She wept for the harm caused by her own way of thinking. She said that we need to listen more, talk less. I knew that listening to Jean, alone, was not going to result in the rematriation of stolen land or the healing of wounds. But, as my wise colleague and chosen kin, Algonquin-kwe Jenn Cole, recently reminded me: this was the work I most "belonged to."

Aging Activisms

Jean and I were not only sharing quiet cups of tea. We were also getting to know each other within our wider community through grassroots events and initiatives. In addition, Jean actively participated in Aging Activisms, the intergenerational research program and collective I was just beginning to build at that time.

Working with a talented team of research assistants and community facilitators, my goal with Aging Activisms was two-fold: to build intergenerational activist community; and to share and record diverse activist stories, centering those most often omitted from social change scholarship and archival records, such as women, elders, youth, queer and trans people, Indigenous and racialized people, and people with disabilities. I was fortunate in this work to receive support from Trent University and the Canada Research Chairs program from 2013 to 2024. I was also fortunate to receive widespread community support.

In our first symposium, my research team called together activists of varied ages and backgrounds, asking what this community might want or need from an intergenerational research project. Jean was integral to this event, as was Shirley. Over the next eight years, we then facilitated nine intergenerational storytelling research workshops, collaborated on numerous research endeavours, built a community archive of local activist stories, created short films and art installations, hosted a multi-year lecture series, and presented at panels and conferences (see page 90 for links to some of our work).

In November of 2023, we mounted an interactive installation at the Peterborough Public Library as a culminating project of Aging Activisms. The central image of the display was the photo of Jean and Shirley at the start of this book. One month shy of her 101st birthday, Jean was finally beginning to slow down. She nonetheless made the considerable effort to attend the community dinner celebrating the installation. Jean whispered to me that this was likely to be her final community event.



Mehrangiz Monsef, Jean, May, and Ziysah at the Aging Activisms culminating event, Peterborough Public Library, 2023.

Jean's Involvement in Aging Activisms

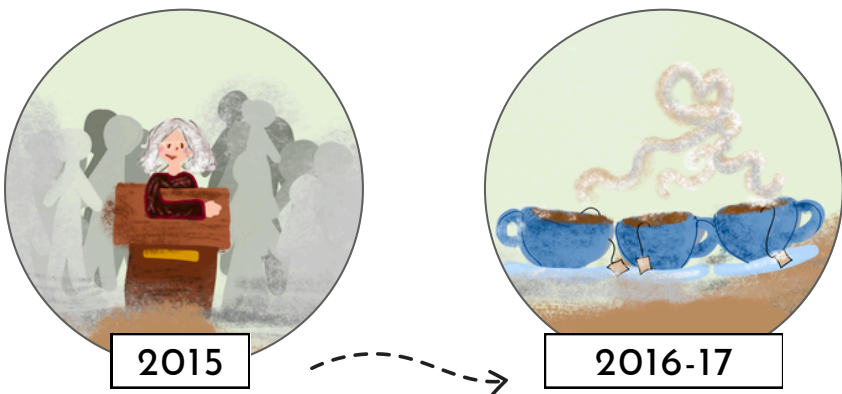
2015: Jean attended our inaugural symposium.

2015: May interviewed Jean as part of a collaboration with the Trent Centre for Aging and Society.

2015: Jean was a guest on Aging Radically, a Trent Radio show hosted by Aging Activisms research assistants Maddy McNabb and Melissa Baldwin.

2016-17: Jean, May, and Emma undertook an extensive life history and archiving project.

2016: Jean participated in an intergenerational storytelling workshop.



2018: Jean reviewed Emma's thesis and attended their defense.

2018: Jean contributed to our Aging Activisms book, and attended the community book launch.

2022: Jean participated in our Zoom focus groups on imagining futures.

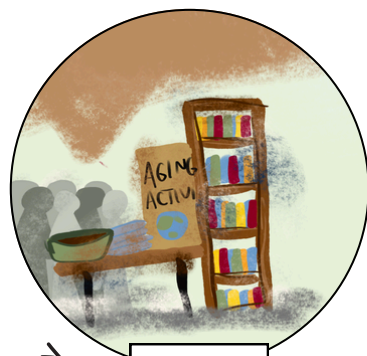
2023: Jean recorded a message for youth participants in our Youth Stories workshop.

2023: Jean attended the Aging Activisms library installation and community dinner.

See Page 90 for a link to Alex Hodson's illustration of Jean's journey with Aging Activisms, with excerpts below.



2022



2023

Aging Activisms brought together hundreds of social changers of all ages. It is hard for me to disentangle my friendship with Jean from the many ways she participated in this larger project. She attended so many of our workshops and events, while continuing to invite me for tea in between, always offering guidance as I navigated community-building as a visitor on colonized land.

Ongoing and engaged relationship-building was a core part of our research methodology. We made space for slow trust-building as we invited participants and partners into our research. This often involved visiting. I understood this approach as resistance to time-pressured, capitalist, colonial ways of extracting people's knowledge. My visits with Jean and many others often included offering rides to appointments, assisting with malfunctioning computers, and holding spacious debriefs of community events. I recall Ziysah once troubleshooting a problem with Jean's vacuum cleaner on a visit to sign a consent form. Though it was often at odds with institutional structures and expectations, this relational practice was indeed the work we belonged to.

Archiving

One summer morning in 2016, Jean called, sounding distressed, and invited me over for tea. When I arrived, I found every surface of her usually tidy apartment covered in files and papers. She explained that it was time; at 93, she was preparing to move into assisted living so that she would no longer need to worry about cooking or shopping. Her issue was her "stuff." She felt trapped by her own meticulous record-keeping and lifelong writing.

Her apartment was filled with the records of her life, dating back to the 1940s and before, most of it detailing her work with First Peoples. This invitation for tea was a plea for help. She was caught between the need to empty her apartment and the fear of discarding anything that might be of use to others.

I am not an archivist, and the task she was setting out was well beyond my plan for Aging Activisms. But I understood the urgency of holding tight to what our elders leave for us, and I wanted to help Jean. We began a series of conversations to plan out our work together. With Jean's permission, I invited graduate student, Emma, to assist in our process. A queer, white settler in their 20s at the time, Emma was in search of a project that would allow them to explore questions around settler consciousness and decolonization. I knew Emma belonged to this work too and would benefit immensely from sitting with Jean.

As we embarked on the work of sorting, cataloguing, and repatriating the materials, it was clear that this downsizing was deeply emotional for Jean. She did not want all she had learned through her treasured relationships with First Peoples to be lost. And so, I asked Jean whether we could record some of her life history as she "toured" us through her personal archives and whether Emma could draw on these interviews in their MA thesis. A publicly available thesis would ensure that Jean's story be accessible to future generations. I also assured Jean that I would hold on to our work together and return to write about it when time and space opened for me to do so. Jean agreed with all of this, happily. She often told me how validated she felt by our deep listening and interest in her life story.

We had about six months to carry out this work before Jean's move to St. John's Retirement Home in 2017. Jean, Emma, and I spent many afternoons together. I led four lengthy life history interviews and six even more lengthy conversations about the contents of Jean's archives.

Guiding Jean's decade-by-decade account of her life, our questions returned often to trying to understand her evolving activism: What drew her into activist work and specifically into her work with First Peoples? How did this change for her over time? How did she sustain herself throughout decades of this journey? What ideas, messages, and wisdom did she want to offer to future generations? We also asked questions about her changing mindset as a settler on colonized land, her views on reconciliation, and her hopes for the future. Toward the end of our intensive work together, Emma led one additional interview with follow-up questions related to their thesis. Throughout this time, there were also many visits that we did not record and many email exchanges.

Meanwhile, we were hard at work organizing Jean's files. Together, Jean and I arranged for the Anglican Church of Canada to acquire much of Jean's original collection, and for other materials to be returned to various organizations and individuals. However, Jean also wanted to ensure that my students and I could easily access her files in the future, and so we agreed to keep copies for our later writing. In the winter and spring of 2017, a wider team of Aging Activisms research assistants became involved in the mammoth project of photocopying files and transcribing interviews. The intergenerational web of connections grew, as Mehrangiz Monsef, Frank Nasca, Melissa Baldwin,

Melissa Hunt, Heidi Burns, and Abi Myerscoff, all in their 20s and 30s at the time, came to belong to this project as well, each in their own ways. In 2018, Emma defended their brilliant thesis, titled “*I will not use the word reconciliation*”—*Exploring Settler (Un)Certainty, Indigenous Refusal, and Decolonization through a Life History Project with Jean Koning* (see page 91 for a link to this work). Jean was thrilled!

The Final Years

After Jean moved, we resumed our more leisurely visits. Jean also continued to participate in Aging Activisms research and to show up in community when she had the energy.

In the final years of her life, I did not see Jean as often as I would have liked to. In an era of COVID-19 precautions, I recall a few chilly outdoor visits, many phone calls, and her rooth birthday party on Zoom. I was undergoing breast cancer treatment, parenting, and caring for my parents, both of whom died within a year of Jean, and so our quiet teas in her apartment became impossible.

I took comfort knowing that Ziysah had begun to visit regularly, listening carefully to what Jean wanted to leave behind for future generations—I am grateful that their end-of-life visits inspired this collaborative project. Jean held so many of us through a world on fire, under lockdown, at war, mired in grief, and still full of possibility. In her very last days, I had the chance to thank Jean for all she had offered me, as I sat bedside in the hospital, holding her hand.

Complexities of Visiting: Grief, Consent, and the Writing of this Book

Visiting is deeply meaningful work, but, as a research process, it is not straightforward. Coming into writing about visiting Jean now, when she is not here in body, reminds me of the complex emotional and ethical dimensions of this work.

From my earliest conversations with Jean, she was preparing to die. Jean anticipated missing her loved ones, worried about her children and grandchildren, and tried to reconcile ongoing tensions in her relationships. She felt grief for people she had lost along the way, for the people she would soon lose, and for the world. In some ways, I was helping her prepare for the end: listening deeply while she shared her stories for posterity; making sure her things made it to where they needed to be.

There was grief for me too. The anticipatory grief of growing to care for someone in the final chapter of life is perhaps inevitable when you begin to visit someone in their 90s. But there was unanticipated grief as well: visiting Jean filled a hole in my own life, calling up my longing for my own grandmother, one of my favourite people in the world, who had died when I was very young. As I listened to Jean, I often imagined what it would be like to hear such intimate stories from my own family members. Emma's thesis and Ziysah's poetry both refer to similar experiences of grief (see page 90-91). I wonder how grief shapes our research, our archiving, our writing? When we extend our research practice into the radical relational work of visiting, is grief inevitable?

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- May Chazan, 2025

I have also grappled with ethical deliberations that arise in this visiting practice. Which parts of our work become our "data?" How do we know what to include and exclude? How do we write about Jean now that she has left this realm?

Jean's consent for the recordings used in this book was express and ongoing; in fact, she would often insist I record something she wanted to say, even when we were just out for a casual lunch. Many times, I explained that, as a professor funded by academic research bodies, I had to follow certain protocols, specifically that the processes surrounding interviews I intended to later cite in my writing had to be approved in advance through an ethics review board. Jean understood. Still, she would sometimes insist I record her, saying that she trusted me to share what needed to be shared, and to do so with accuracy and thoughtfulness.

In 2022, Ziysah took on their own personal project that likewise involved visiting and recording Jean's wisdom. Jean offered this same level of trust and consent to Ziysah, both orally and in writing, even communicating this consent to her children in writing, as she looked ahead to the possible use of these recordings after her death. While Ziysah's project was not a part of Aging Activisms or affiliated with the university, it was intimately connected to our decade-long story sharing process with Jean.

When Ziysah and I decided to collaborate on this project—a project that would not have happened at this time if not for Ziysah’s impetus to assist with grant-writing—I was faced with difficult deliberations. How do we honour the knowledge and wisdom Jean entrusted to us and wanted to share, while also respecting the ethics protocols governing my work? This deliberation, I have come to understand, is perhaps the most complicated part of engaging in visiting as methodology. To be clear, I have never considered standard research methods involving one-off interviews particularly ethical: these tend to extract knowledge without context, relationships, or reciprocity, despite the formal consent process. Visiting, on the other hand, centres relationship; requires ongoing consent and explicit invitation; is based on trust and care; and resists capitalist extractive processes. Still, how do we honour knowledge shared over a long, care-filled timeline, from within and outside of an academic institution, as people who care deeply about ethics protocols?

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While I don’t have clear answers, I do want to outline the decisions made in this project.

On citing Jean directly: The most detailed citations of Jean sharing her life story, which appear in the section called “In Jean’s Words,” are drawn from the interviews I carried out with Emma in 2016 and 2017. This work was approved by Trent’s ethics board and completed while Jean was able to review all of the transcripts.

The selected stories are carefully curated from a much larger body of material in an attempt to deliver Jean’s core messages to future generations. Ziysah supported the selection and editing process, translating the dialogue into written stories that hold the integrity of our conversations, and adding sub-titles for readability. I then grouped these stories into five chapters, loosely based on the different stages/places of Jean’s life.

In addition to these stories, we include several clearly-labelled quotations from Ziysah’s personal recordings. Where we include citations from Jean recorded outside of institutional ethics protocols, we focus on personal exchanges or ideas that she had also shared publicly elsewhere: for example, in her blogs, public writing, and/or other interviews that were part of our research.

On personal reflection and paraphrasing: In trying to honour knowledge Jean shared outside of Aging Activisms research while still respecting institutional protocols, I have invited personal reflection into the project. Ziysah, Emma, and I all offer reflections on visiting Jean, sometimes drawing in stories or quotations as we do. This aligns well with the project’s thematic goal of exploring the practice of visiting and meets academic ethics guidelines.

Drawing on critical and feminist approaches to oral history, I have chosen to leave in my own voice in certain

places within Jean's stories, as a way of reflecting the relational nature of the knowledge shared. Where pertinent, I begin Jean's stories with my own research question in italics. At the start of each section of Jean's life history, I offer short context pieces in my own voice, paraphrasing some of what I heard Jean share about that period of her life. I hope these choices reveal some of the context in which Jean offered her stories, while also reflecting my own active listening and learning.

On photos, art, and other materials: The photos throughout the book come from Jean's files, Aging Activisms, and Ziysah's files; all are shared with permission. I am grateful to Jean for encouraging me to keep copies of her archives, as I have also dipped into these to add visual interest throughout. I credit Jillian for selecting and placing the visual materials; I am grateful to Jillian and Alex for their artistic contributions.

On the book's focus: This project focuses on Jean's more public work, particularly her reflections on walking with First Peoples, learning to listen, and settler responsibility. It has been difficult to narrow down what to share, and the most glaring omission may be Jean's great love and commitment to her family and friends, whom she spoke about extensively. I felt that the most sensitive approach was to highlight Jean's public and political reflections, particularly as Jean is no longer with us to review the work. Personal names are omitted, with the exceptions of Jean's late husband, Tony, their children, public figures, and the names of Aging Activisms participants.

I acknowledge that this small project does not capture a fraction of all it could have—particularly if Jean had written it herself! I also acknowledge the rich web of relationships that held, taught, and brought Jean to the moment in which she was able to share her stories with me and my research team. I offer deep thanks to all those close to Jean, as I know you are a part of the wisdom she is offering here to future generations.

