

Sagatay – the Light Before Dawn: Indigenizing One Canadian University

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1. Treaties

I begin with a very brief summary of the history of treaty making that has shaped the relationship between colonizers and Indigenous peoples in Canada, and that has led to the current drive to transform higher education in profound ways. Our position in the east – the ‘people of the dawn land’ as my colleagues describe themselves – is after all special. It was along the eastern seaboard of North America that most Europeans first ‘discovered’ and entered Turtle Island (Miller, 1974). Although the first European settlement to be founded in North America is in some dispute, the list provided by Wikipedia shows that visits, explorations and seasonal settlement began in the fifteenth century (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_oldest_continuously_inhabited_cities#North_America). Canada’s European history can be plotted chronologically from east to west, beginning with the Norse in the tenth century (Ingstad, 1969), John Cabot in 1497, and a plethora of forays over the next four centuries involving raiding, trading and eventually miscegenation between well-established Indigenous nations and communities and an incoming assortment of Europeans including adventurers and explorers, merchants and entrepreneurs, refugees and asylum-seekers, and eventually settlers. Relationships evolved from those of succour and support provided to early settlers, to allies and allegiances between warring factions and nations (both European and Indigenous), through to conquest, colonization and

finally the assimilation of Indigenous people by the burgeoning settler state.

Treaties between Indigenous nations and what became the Canadian state began in the territory of the Wabanaki Confederacy as a series of Peace and Friendship Treaties beginning in 1725 and extending to 1779. These treaties recognize the Wabenaki as existing inhabitants with rights to the land, and as military allies in arguably nation-to-nation relationships. However, once the Europeans had settled their differences concerning the discovery, conquest and occupation of North America, treaties with Indigenous nations changed. Further west across Canada, pacts between Indigenous people and Europeans were no longer between allies, military or otherwise. Once Europeans began arriving in numbers intent on settling, lands had to be made available, and a series of numbered treaties were imposed around the Great Lakes in which Indigenous land rights were abrogated in return for modest land reserves and specific services such as medicine and education. This treaty formula began after the 1867 Confederation of Canadian and extended through much of Upper and Lower Canada, across the prairies, and paused along the foothills of the Rockies in 1921. As these treaties were implemented across the Canadian west, fewer services were offered and the land reserves, calculated on acreage per capita in any given treaty region, grew smaller. After Treaty Eleven, there was a lull in the treaty-making process. By the time colonization had reached British Columbia, the idea of treaty-making was abandoned in favour of the notion that all people living in Canada would be treated equally, with no special regard to Indigenous populations. This understanding took effect in Newfoundland and Labrador when it became the tenth province to join Confederation in 1949. Following Trudeau's 1969 White Paper on 'Indian policy,' two key land claims cases triggered the legal

debate that confirmed Aboriginal Title in 1973. The Comprehensive Land Claims process that developed in response covers modern treaties in Labrador, British Columbia and the Canadian North. This pattern was substantially interrupted with the formation of Nunavut on April 1st, 1999. Since then, several other relatively self-governing territories have come into being (Nunatsiavut in December 2005, for instance. For further information on this and other recent treaties, visit Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada: <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100032297/1100100032309>; and for key dates marking the relationship between Indigenous people and the Canadian state: https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2012/01/24/timeline_key_dates_for_canadas_dealings_with_first_nations.html). Treaties since then have become increasingly complex, involving levels of self-governance and a growing acknowledgement by Canada that it has to deal with Indigenous peoples on a much more equal footing that respects the idea of nationhood. Introduction

2. Indian Residential Schooling

But the most pernicious area of colonial legislation, designed to ‘fast-track’ assimilation of Indigenous populations into Euro-Canadian mainstream society, was that of residential schooling. For more than a century, policies governing the fiduciary responsibility of Canada to provide education for all Indigenous people (a longstanding treat right) has been based upon the mass residential schooling of all Indigenous children. In these ‘total institutions’ (Goffman, 1961), Aboriginal children were removed from their homes and communities for up to ten or even twelve months of the year over their entire school life. Within these isolated and solitary institutions, the children had no champions, no family, and no advocates. They were subject to all manner of abuse while their

cultures and languages were relentlessly stripped from them. They were never able to re-enter their communities because they had lost their languages and any working knowledge of their own societies and cultures. Often, important family members had died while they were away at school. Others were uncomprehending of either the losses or the abuses suffered by these children. Young Aboriginals had no family or community support structures and no experience as family members. They frequently 'self-medicated' with alcohol and drugs, and failed at raising their own families. Residential schooling went on for several generations, beginning with the establishment of Industrial schools during the 1870s and 1880s, and ending with the closure of the last residential schools at the end of the twentieth century. This is the extraordinary legacy that Canada now faces. These are the circumstances that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set out to confront, and to which the calls to action are addressed.

3. Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) have guided the steps taken by my colleagues and me in our attempts to transform education and pedagogy within our own institution. A summary of the 94 calls to action also outlines the nature of the relationship they seek to transform. The first calls to action are listed in the section called 'Legacies,' and begin with the category 'Child Welfare.' In January 2016, Cindy Blackstock won her case with the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, filed in 2007 against the federal government, and revealed that the support provided by the federal government for children on reserves was much lower than support provided by provincial governments for off-reserve children, resulting in far greater numbers of Aboriginal children ending up in the child welfare system (see Cindy

Blackstock, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/canada-discriminates-against-children-on-reserves-tribunal-rules-1.3419480>). Furthermore, call number 8 recognizes and draws attention to the fact that funding for Aboriginal education falls short of the levels of funding provided for other Canadian school children. Under the heading 'Language and culture' it becomes apparent that despite providing continuous comprehensive support for the two 'founding' languages of French and English, no Aboriginal language is accorded such privileges and that of the 50 plus languages currently being spoken across Canada, only three are expected to survive beyond the 21st century (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/once-vibrant-aboriginal-languages-struggle-for-survival-1.1173659>; Crystal, 2002). Under 'Health' the commissioners implore Canadians to ensure that health funding and support for Indigenous Canadians at least meet the current standards in place for other Canadians, so that life expectancy among Aboriginal peoples is no longer so much lower, and that the high rates of infant mortality and youth suicide are effectively ameliorated. Under Justice, Canadians are asked to investigate the discriminatory behaviours of enforcement structures in Canadian society, and the disproportionate numbers of Indigenous people in Canadian jails, and to address the relative lack of financial support for those caught up in the meshes of an alien justice system that does not respect the laws and cultures of the people they purportedly serve. Instead, the Commission recommends that the justice system offer realistic alternatives to the current penal system. In order to bring about lasting and meaningful reconciliation, the commissioners suggest that Canadians adopt the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (Canada was one of four countries that initially refused to do so), and honour all its treaties with Indigenous peoples, including the 1763 Royal Proclamation that guaranteed independence of governance, security of access to

land, and the right to a distinct way of life for Indigenous people in Canada on a nation-to-nation basis. The report suggests monitoring the process of improving government understanding of its relations with Indigenous people and the establishment of mechanisms necessary for renewed and equal relations. Finally, the calls to action demand that discrimination in all its forms comes to an end and we recognize all Canadians, Indigenous or otherwise, as Treaty People.

4. Indigenizing the Academy

It is clear that transformation of Canadian higher education is long overdue. Across Canada, academic institutions are attempting to ‘Indigenize the academy’ with their own applications of the TRC calls to action. On its Chair in Indigenous Governance web page (<http://www.ryerson.ca/chair-indigenous-governance/about-the-chair/a-call-to-reconciliation/>), Ryerson University invites their academic community to engage “in a conversation on how to work towards reconciliation and decolonization, and why this matters in relation to our work.” They reveal that while the national average for achieving a degree is 26.5%, it is only 1.7% for Inuit, 8.7 for First Nations and 11.7% for Métis (2011 census). Besides Laurier University, Ryerson lists a consortium of ten other universities including Manitoba, British Columbia, Winnipeg, St. Boniface, Carleton, Regina, Lakehead, the North, Algoma, and Red River College who are currently working to implement the calls for action of the TRC report. The universities of Victoria and Saskatchewan have also implemented programs to Indigenize their campuses. In the heartland of Canada, largely covered by the numbered treaties of post-confederation Canada, and beyond, efforts to “heed the TRC’s calls to action” and make their universities places “where Indigenous students can thrive” are well under way. In the east, our history and treaty legacy is different. Our

history of European contact considerably predates confederation but is nevertheless fundamental to the development of Canada. While we have treaties of peace and friendship, there are no reserves and Indigenous nations are still petitioning the government for the right to self-governance, a share in the resources, and the basic right to a sustainable traditional way of life with all that entails.

Transformation for our campus really began when we first appointed an Elder in Residence. This was quickly followed by the appointment of the first Indigenous Director of the centre. Since then, our corridors have become increasingly populated with Indigenous scholars and Elders. They are in constant demand – for their teachings, their insights, their input on committees, their ideas for transformation. One of my earliest interactions with our first Elder in Residence helps put this into perspective. I had knocked on her door to introduce myself as an adjunct connected with the centre, but as someone whose involvement had not been extensive. “My academic reference is Red Pedagogy,” the Elder said. I looked blankly at her as I had never heard of this or its proponent, Sandy Grande (2004). The Elder turned towards me with a stern expression (one I came to recognize as the prelude to serious teaching), beckoned me to take a seat, and sat down opposite me. This was the first in a series of intensive conversations we had over the course of the next two years. When our Elder died suddenly, the Elder who took her place also took over the role of mentor for me and many of us who aspired to be good allies in the work of Indigenousization. Each Elder I have had the privilege of working with since then has brought a specific set of teachings, understandings, and new insights. Such is the work our Elders and Indigenous scholars and colleagues face: a constant and steady stream of us who bring willingness to the table and sometimes think that that is enough. The calls to action include number 62.ii:

Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.

Before this is possible, the teachers themselves have to be educated on these matters. But it needs to go further still because the thinking of these teachers needs to be addressed, challenged, and transformed through *Piliwitaḥasuḡawasuḡako* (the Wolostoqey word for changing one's heart and mind). At face value, teaching about Indigenous experiences, traditions and values would appear to be a curricular matter. But unless these ideas are embedded in the full context of Indigenous relationships and experiences, the teachings themselves remain hollow (Wilson, 2012). My Elders began this journey of transformation by working with each of us and ensuring that we understood the meaning of the teachings they had in their power to share.

The traditions and teachings are not without other challenges. Indigenous communities across Canada are still reeling from the impact of residential schooling. An Elder whom I had the honour to supervise as a graduate student shared a particular story with me that makes this point. She had been interviewing a residential school survivor. She said, "he was embarrassed, humiliated." She had discovered that his dearest wish had been to learn his traditions from his grandfather. "But his grandfather spoke Mi'kmaq, and he only spoke English. He had no way to share in his grandfather's knowledge. He did not even know how to approach his grandfather to ask for this knowledge. He could not bear that he did not know his own native tongue, nor could he bear to reveal the depth of his ignorance to his grandfather." Number 13 of the calls to action asks the federal government to acknowledge that "Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights." On our

campus, our Elder in Residence offers language instruction at beginner and intermediate levels. However, we do not yet have the resources for language immersion. Language revival is immensely complex, especially when dealing with an endangered language. Of the two languages spoken in our area, one has fewer than 100 mother tongue speakers, and all of these are elderly.

The Elder I supervised often came to stay with me. We debated a lot over a range of persistent issues. Sometimes, she would say, "I need to be with my own people." And she would pack up and leave. But we always retained a strong affection and regard for each other. She took me to my first sweat lodge ceremony. Although I had been instructed not to share any of the experiences of the ceremony, and to treat it as sacred and confidential, I was surprised by the emotional and spiritual depth I experienced. It remains one of my most valuable and vivid experiences, and it taught me about the need to honour Indigenous spirituality. The calls to action require that we make space for Indigenous spirituality for the purposes of healing, that cultural competency training is provided for healthcare professionals (number 23: iii), and that "the right to practise, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies" (number 48: ii) be upheld. The desire to have a permanent sweat lodge available to us on campus challenges the current understanding that provisions for spirituality should remain non-denominational. So far we have held one sweat, as part of a conference for Indigenous teacher educators in 2016. However, the lodge was removed after the ceremony was completed.

It is clear that we have much work ahead of us on this Indigenizing journey. While the issues are complex, the need is great. And the time is now.

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