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ÂSOKAN – “BRIDGE”:

BUILDING THE BRIDGE TO RECONCILIATION,

ONE STORY AT A TIME

By

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Abstract

In June 2015, Volume One of the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* was released. Outlining the history of residential schools in Canada and the on-going impact felt by survivors and subsequent generations of Aboriginal peoples, the report also made 94 recommendations to help facilitate the reconciliation process. Canadians were spurred to react and act. Within academic institutions, there is much discussion about incorporating Indigenous perspectives and histories into all levels of public education. As an advisor in a public post-secondary institution, I question my role and the role of the institution in helping Aboriginal students on campus. How do we unlearn the Eurocentric history that we were taught and appreciate the Indigenous peoples, culture, and history that surround us on Treaty 6 land? Through autoethnographic writing, I explore that question and conclude that we do so by listening and building relationships, one person at a time. As a result, we can build bridges and make positive and meaningful cultural connections on the road to reconciliation.

A Note on Terminology

Language can be political, complex, and ever changing. For an excellent glossary of appropriate terminology related to Aboriginal Peoples of Canada, please refer to the National Aboriginal Health Organization’s guidelines available at www.naho/publications/topics/terminology. I have followed those guidelines as appropriate. For quotations in my paper, I have directly quoted the terms used by the original authors, maintaining the terminology and capitalization of the original passages. Because it was the language of my youth in the 1970s and 1980s, I—for the most part—used “Indian” and “Native” when referring to my childhood and teenage experiences; however, because these terms have fallen out of use and are considered outdated by many, I have highlighted their usage by putting quotation marks around them. I have most commonly used “Aboriginal” as the all-encompassing adjective for the First Peoples of Canada, but for stylistic variety, I have also used “First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI)” and “Indigenous.” Because “First Nations” includes both Status and Non-Status Indians but is separate from Metis and Inuit peoples, I have used this term judiciously for specific people. For a broader discussion of the complexities and evolution of appropriate terminology, see Lisa Monchalin’s introduction in *The Colonial Problem*, listed in the Works Cited.



Figure 1. Tipis erected for a cultural camp I attended at Sweetgrass First Nation, Saskatchewan. Photo by author, 2016.

Âsokan – “Bridge”: Building the Bridge to Reconciliation, One Story at a Time

As a college advisor, I work each year with dozens of Indigenous students who come to college in pursuit of “higher learning,” and each year, I watch them fall like leaves from a tree in autumn. By the Christmas break, several have withdrawn or disappeared. Many of those who remain will be put on probation and will be gone officially by the February break. The retention rates for Aboriginal students are abysmal. If Indigenous students are required to withdraw, there are academic and financial implications. In my experience, many of them take time off and then reappear in hopes of a fresh start. In the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) notes that “[t]he barriers to post-secondary education have had profound effects. . . . Almost no one with some university or college education who spoke to the Commission had been able to obtain that education directly after high school. Most . . . had lost years to the time it took them to heal enough to even consider the possibility of upgrading their schooling” (151). If success is a relative term, then there are definitely successes; however, completion rates are dismal. I can think of only a handful of Aboriginal students with whom I have worked over the past thirteen years who have convocated from college or university. According to Statistics Canada, “only 9.8 per cent of those reporting Indigenous identity on the National Household survey questionnaire of 2011 had a university degree compared with 26.5 per cent of non-Indigenous Canadians” (qtd. in Monchalin 160); this is a substantial gap. The lack of educated First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) professionals contributes to the ongoing disparities in education. It is, indeed, a vicious cycle but one from which we can emerge.

The TRC’s final report further states that

[f]or over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element to this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide." . . . Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next. In its dealing with Aboriginal people, Canada did all these things. (1)

And now, this generation is left to pick up the pieces and rebuild entire nations.

Working in an educational environment, I am cognizant of the fact that I am a member of an institution and bureaucracy that is not culturally sensitive in its offerings, procedures, and environment. We may hang First Nations art on the walls and erect a tipi each fall, but we currently do not have a mandate or a strategy to recruit and retain Aboriginal students. We accept those students and their tuition dollars but are not prepared to serve them adequately. I operate within the colonial constraints of a traditional post-secondary institution in a predominantly Euro-Canadian community; therefore, I am seen as the "Other" by Indigenous students while they are seen as the "Other" by the mainstream college community. Because of the colonial

foundation on which we tread, the divide persists. Kanu explains that colonialism comprises not only the physical conquest of land but also the “control of the mind of the conquered and subordinated in an imperative to ‘civilize’ the Other and keep the Other in a perpetual state of psychological subordination. Although the physical occupation and control of territories may end, the processes of colonial cultural production and psychologization persist” (9). The legacies of this create an intergenerational impact. Writing of Canada’s notorious residential school system, Monchalin asserts that “the program of genocide carried out at these schools affected not only the children who attended them but also their children and their children’s children” (137-38), and she provides examples of devastating repercussions such as “social mal-adjustment, family breakdown, suicide, alcoholism, domestic violence, and loss of parenting skills” (138). The generation of students with whom I work did not attend residential school; however, the fallout of the experiences of their parents and grandparents is passed on to them in the form of intergenerational trauma. This was reinforced for me when I was working with a young First Nations woman who was moving her children off the reserve in order to come to college. Despite our efforts to find funding, housing, and a kindergarten program for her daughter, she was reluctant to follow through with the relocation because of a lack of support from her family. When I asked why she was reconsidering after all the pieces had come together (in my mind, at least), she retorted, “Don’t you get it? My dad went to residential school. He doesn’t trust you and doesn’t want me and my kids here.” Initially, I was surprised that her father would associate our modern college with the mandate of a residential school, but then I considered the perceived parallels and understood the fears. I know that the lack of trust was not directed at me personally, but rather at the institution I represented. This was a lesson for me to consider the extended family as part of the equation. To establish trust, we need to build bridges of cultural

understanding and engagement between Euro-Canadian institutions and all students. This can begin through formal and informal cross-cultural training and conversations.

Obviously, systemic barriers exist for Aboriginal students that are beyond my control; however, as a member of and a college advisor in this bureaucracy, I ask myself, “What I can do?” I believe the response lies, at least in part, in questioning internalized colonial assumptions that would allow me to build more meaningful connections between Indigenous students and the predominantly white colonial institutions in which we attempt to educate one another. How do we build that *âsokan*, the bridge of which my Cree friends speak? In order to begin, I must question the deeply ingrained and assumed realities about Indigenous peoples that stem from the cultural stereotypes with which I grew up and the colonial education I received. After Confederation, the federal government concerned itself with “regulating the education (and the moral behaviours) of those not considered ideal types”—Indigenous peoples (Kanu 15). The task was undertaken, in part, “through the Indian Act (1879) and the establishment of the Department of Indian Affairs (1880), [when] the government of Canada became unabashedly involved in transforming the character of all Aboriginals, ‘protecting’ them on reserves, and civilizing and assimilating the ‘savages’ into Anglo-Saxon norms” (Kanu 15). These policies and practices, in turn, informed the education received by thousands of young Canadians over decades. As a white woman raised on Treaty 6 land, I struggle to reconcile the teachings of my 1970s-80s colonial public school education with the reality in which I find myself in the new millennium. What can I learn from or about FNMI cultures to enhance the work I do with Indigenous students? Through autoethnographic research, I aim to uncover the underlying assumptions, biases, and gaps in my understanding in order to be part of the healing process of reconciliation. A “characteristic that binds all autoethnographies is the use of personal experience to examine

and/or critique cultural experience” (Holman Jones et al. 22); by analyzing and reflecting upon my personal cultural experiences, I can begin the arduous process of re-evaluating my colonial assumptions, moving forward both personally and professionally, and sharing what I have learned.

Autoethnographic research is self reflection in writing that explores the researcher’s experience and connects this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings (Ellis xix). I have come to see that stories underlie, inform, and can also negatively affect the way in which we act and teach and that we benefit from examining our understandings through writing and rewriting. The choice to do autoethnographic research is the result of my academic, professional, and personal experiences with the intention of bringing those together as Bochner does when he explores the personal and social relevance of self-narration in his academic life; through personal reflection, we see that the social world can be “understood as a world of connection, contact, and relationship. It is also a world where consequences, values, politics, and moral dilemmas are abundant and central” (435). As I meet with students each academic year, I am faced with this social world and its often unquestioned assumptions.

As an academic practice, autoethnography takes the “process of thinking *about* [a story] to one of thinking *with* [a story] (Frank, 1995). Theory meets story when we think with a story rather than about it” (Bochner 436). Autoethnography is both a form of engagement and reflection. Holman Jones et al. point out that autoethnography is distinguished from other forms of personal writing by the following characteristics: “(1) purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices, (2) making contributions to existing research, (3) embracing vulnerability with purpose, and (4) creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to

compel a response” (22). In the autoethnographic process, I will use Meijers and Lengelle’s “writing through transformation” model to explore my “first story” (which is rooted in my colonial upbringing and the cultural assumptions entrenched in and part of my own education) and develop from that a “second story” (which is a positive and progressive post-colonial story which will enable me to begin the work necessary to shed my childhood assumptions and move forward in bridging the cultural gaps between me and my students).

The research method of autoethnography and “re-storying” is culturally appropriate because storytelling is an essential part of learning and teaching in many Aboriginal cultures. One of my mentors reminds me that in the oral tradition, we learn indirectly through the telling and re-telling of stories. In the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, a non-Aboriginal woman summed up the powerful experience of listening to residential school survivors tell their stories as follows: “By listening to your story, my story can change. By listening to your story, I can change” (TRC 21). Personal and cultural narratives can be powerful tools, and autoethnography is an appropriate means for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to share those stories. In a chapter entitled “Autoethnography as the Engagement of Self/Other, Self/Culture, Self/Politics, and Selves/Futures,” Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson writes:

The politics of representation have been engaged in relation to the portrayal of non-Western, “indigenous” peoples, where the voices of the colonizers often spoke for, or indeed drowned out, the voices of the colonized. As Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier, and Pheasant (2011), note, for many non-Western peoples, research has actually become a dirty word. This, they argue, stems from “a history of mainstream research being imposed on indigenous peoples in ways that have subverted the knowledge and voices coming from within their communities,” thus affirming the dominant, colonizing

culture's view of itself as the sole locus of legitimate knowledge and power (p. 522). . . .

Autoethnography can therefore provide us with a potent methodological means of engaging in a discursive and representational space for voices hitherto unheard or actively silenced, thereby posing a direct challenge to hegemonic discourses. (290-91)

As a member of the dominant culture, I have the opportunity to give voice to the assumptions of the colonizers and try to undo them in myself, thereby creating possible solutions based on new conceptions. I also have the opportunity to better listen to the historical, cultural, and personal narratives of the colonized. Perhaps this generation can rewrite and reread the stories together.

This is a timely undertaking. With the release of the TRC's final report in June 2015, the nation has been prodded into action. Within academic institutions, there is much discussion about incorporating Indigenous perspectives and histories into various levels of education. Aboriginal issues are more consistently highlighted in the media. People are talking, some are listening, and some are taking action.

In the closing chapter of her sociological study on crime and injustice in Canada, criminologist Lisa Monchalin invokes the Prophecy of the Seven Fires, "seven predictions from seven prophets . . . each referred to as a 'fire'. . . that referred to a particular time in the future" (287). The prophecies foretold the arrival of light-skinned people and the fallout that was to ensue. The seventh fire is a turning point at which the people "are told to turn around and retrace the steps of the ones who brought us here. Their sacred purpose is to walk back along the red road of our ancestors' path and to gather up all the fragments that lay scattered along the trail. Fragments of land, tatters of language, bits of songs, stories, sacred teachings—all that was dropped along the way" (Wall Kimmerer 367). They are instructed to "turn to their elders for guidance but will come to find that the elders have fallen asleep because people have stopped

asking them to share their wisdom and guidance. Some elders, however, ‘will be silent out of fear’ and will choose to stay silent. Thus, the New People will have to approach the elders with care to ask for guidance and teachings” (Monchalin 289). This speaks of turning to the past in order to move forward with the potential for reconciliation and healing. However, the prophecies end with a dire warning:

During this time, the light-skinned peoples will be faced with a decision. They will have to pick one of two paths. If they pick the correct path, it will light an eighth and last fire . . . which would lead to an era of eternal sisterhood, brotherhood, peace, and love. Yet, if the light-skinned peoples choose the wrong path, the road to destruction, it will cause world-wide suffering for all peoples. (Monchalin 289)

Because all societies need narratives with which to identify and foster hope, the prophecies represent ways in which we can integrate past experience and move forward with more cultural understanding and compassion. This is the crossroads at which we now stand.

I strongly believe that all of us who work with students in post-secondary education have a role to play in re-storying our collective pasts and redirecting our futures. Change begins by raising awareness about our own cultural assumptions and indoctrinations. It is no longer sufficient to have good intentions; we must unpack what has been given to us as cultural baggage and take action.

For me, there was not one particular student or one critical moment that ignited my desire to connect with and make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal students. Rather, it was a culmination of connections over a lifetime—interactions with individuals, of course, but also with photographs, paintings, and stories. Individually, these moments may have had little impact;

however, pieced together, they represent dots on a map that begin to reveal new territory. As White and Epston explain,

Concluding that we cannot have direct knowledge of the world, social scientists proposed that what persons know of life they know through “lived experience.” This proposal led to the generation of new questions: How do persons organize their stock of lived experience? What do persons do with this experience in order to give it meaning and to make sense out of their lives? How is lived experience given expression? Those social scientists embracing the text analogy responded by arguing that, in order to make sense of our lives and to express ourselves, experience must be ‘storied’ and it is this storying that determines the meaning ascribed to experience. (9-10)

Those “lived experiences” have brought me here, compelled to find my way through familiar ground, but with a new way of seeing.

I did not know it at the time, but I lived most of my childhood in a colonial empire on the Canadian prairies. An elementary school class photo captures the whiteness of my childhood: tousled blonde bangs and pigtails, freckles, fair skin. I knew nothing else. I didn’t see it at the time, but we all looked the same. I was oblivious to “the Other.”

Images of the “noble savage” and other caricatures appeared in movies, songs, and Social Studies textbooks: the Lone Ranger and Tonto; the red chief and his daughter Tiger Lily in Disney’s *Peter Pan*; “one little, two little, three little Indians”; and the stern and stoic, cross-armed, barely clad man with long braids, a feather, and a tomahawk—entire nations and cultures reduced to stereotypes. The TRC provides additional examples of derogatory language: “An examination of the treatment of Aboriginal people in provincially approved textbooks reveals a serious and deep-rooted problem. . . . A 1968 survey pointed out that in some books, the word

squaw was being used to describe Aboriginal women, and the word *redskins* used to describe Aboriginal people” (75). “Indians” were part of my childhood vernacular in a terribly racialized way that, today, I struggle to comprehend: “Indian giver,” “squaw wrestling,” and “climb the totem pole.” I was never scolded for using such language. It was socially acceptable and ingrained in not only our popular culture but also our educational system.

Most tourist destinations sold “Native” souvenirs that allegedly represented Canada—plastic brown dolls dressed in imitation rawhide with fringes and headbands; beaded necklaces and belts; miniature totem poles manufactured in China; wallets, pencil cases, and drinking glasses emblazoned with the cartoonish faces of “the red man.” The likely targets for these knick-knacks were foreign tourists; however, most children of my generation collected the same souvenirs. What we did not understand was that those brightly painted images meant to represent the wild Canadian prairies and a time long past were real people, real nations that still existed—that still exist—not some long-forgotten piece of Canadian history. To witness the reality of our past, all we needed to do was head north on the highway to the nearest reserve.

“Indians” were always there—rarely in direct view, but rather—on the periphery of my white world on the Canadian prairies. I was raised twenty minutes from a reservation but only set foot on one as a child when dragged to my brother’s hockey games. Sometimes, a carload of people “from the reserve” would drive down our lane, looking for someone or something. *Terrified* would be too strong an adjective to describe my feeling at their approach, but it was scary to have dark strangers cross into our yard, our “territory.” At the lake each summer, the white families occupied the majority of the sandy beach while the “Native kids” stayed at the far end where the playground equipment was rusty and the water was weedy. That’s just how it was. We never talked to one another and never played together; however, as I watched them from the

corner of my eye, I am sure that they were cautiously watching me as well. As innocent children, we may not have been able to articulate it, but we were “the Other” to one another.

In the introduction to *Curriculum as Cultural Practice: Postcolonial Imaginations*, editor Yatta Kanu posits that education controlled by the dominant culture is used to establish and reinforce the power of that group, thus widening the gap with the “Other”: “The contention is that the purpose of school is to create a form of consciousness that enables the inculcation of the knowledge and culture of dominant groups as official knowledge for all students, thereby allowing dominant groups to maintain social control without resorting to overt mechanisms of domination” (Althusser and Apple, qtd. in Kanu 5). That “official knowledge” became the version of Canadian history that my generation learned in the 1970s and 1980s. Those messages also permeated popular culture and perceptions.

For me, those passing glances and chance encounters were always laced with fear. We were kids playing in the sand on a beach under the summer sun. In reality, what could have happened? In retrospect, it seems ridiculous, and it brings tears to my eyes to be this honest with myself over thirty years later. But yes, I was afraid. Who told me to be afraid? Who told me to stay away?

No one.

And everyone. And everything I was taught in school. And every image that I saw of an “Indian” when I was a child.

No one said a word. Parents and teachers were not overtly racist. And yet, I was afraid. I was afraid because everyone and everything I knew about “Natives” separated us—we were so different that there was no possible way that we could ever be connected and, therefore, we must remain segregated. “[C]urricular encounter with the Other has been unequal, unethical, and

anchored in racism and violence” (Kanu 16). That unquestioned segregation instilled fear, and fear breeds mistrust which, in turn, fuels racism.

But maybe I was a little different. I was afraid . . . but I was also curious. And it is that curiosity that brought me to where I am today. In “Narratives at Work: The Development of Career Identity,” Meijers and Lengelle’s theoretical model of identity formation through narrative shows how we work with lived experience to shape second stories by narrating and inquiring about the truth of the “first” stories that we have been told (culturally and historically, for example) and that we tell ourselves. This is my first story, my childhood experiences.

At Queen Elizabeth Elementary School, our house teams were named after “Indian tribes.” We didn’t learn about the cultures or histories of our namesakes, but we did get to appropriate their names for recreational purposes. I was a proud Micmac, battling the Hurons and Bella Coolas—playing soccer and running races in the name of my tribe. My mother sewed a badge with a red emblem to distinguish me from my opponents. How’s that for colonialism?

Even though Aboriginal people were on the periphery of my childhood, we rarely came into direct contact with one another. That changed in Grade 7 when I met Reggie Coyote.¹ There are many reasons I remember Reggie, but with a surname like “Coyote” in the midst of the very English Bakers, Smiths, and Knights, it is hard to be forgotten.

I was twelve years old. I am not sure how old Reggie was, but he played hockey with my brother who is five years older than I am, so he was definitely more mature than his classmates. While most of us had not yet hit puberty, Reggie had facial hair and had already experienced his growth spurt; he towered over the pupils and the teacher. His size may have made him intimidating, but he was the class clown—nothing like the serious, stoic “Indians” I had seen in books. Looking back, I now realize that the humour may have been meant to detract from not

only his racial “Otherness,” but also his size and education. Regardless, I had a crush on him. I think our teacher Mrs. Foster did too.² Reggie could make her crack a smile beneath the layers of white foundation and powder that clogged her wrinkles. One day in preparation for a spelling test, Reggie moved the rolling cart of encyclopedias next to his desk. Mrs. Foster did not realize what he was doing until she came to the eighth word on the test . . . which was “encyclopedia.” Reggie smiled at the rest of us as he copied the word from the spine of the books stacked on the cart. When the teacher realized what he was doing, she marched smartly down the aisle in her coral suit and matching high heels while the culprit hopped out of his desk and pushed the cart up and down the aisles. Mrs. Foster chased him around the class, trying to hide the smile on her face and the knowledge that she had been outwitted by a Coyote.

Did the teachers ever consider students like Reggie and his ancestors when discussing Canadian history? Did the white majority in my Grade 7 class ever question how the West was *really* won? One Aboriginal student recalls his history lessons as follows: “When I went to school in Fort McPherson I can remember being taught that the Indians were savages. We were violent, cruel and uncivilized. I remember reading history books that glorified the white man who slaughtered whole nations of Indian people. No one called the white man savages, they were heroes who explored new horizons or conquered new frontiers” (qtd. in Francis 79). Francis concludes that “the curriculum was not devised for Native students. . . . Their discomfort, their shame, was incidental. The curriculum was devised for white youngsters like myself. It was supposed to teach us a view of history which rationalized the assimilationist policies being carried out by our government. In effect, we were being educated for racism” (79). As a diligent and obedient student, I considered the history I was taught to be absolute fact because that’s what

my teacher said and it was written in a book, but did my “Indian” classmate squirm in his seat as he read the stories that portrayed his ancestors as conquered and uncultured savages?

As a teenager in the 1980s, I was fascinated by the notion of Canada as a multicultural “mosaic.” It seemed so superior to the “melting pot” of our American neighbours who expected assimilation rather than cultural diversity. I held on to that misguided notion until I attended university in the 1990s, where I first learned about my country’s mistreatment of cultural minority groups during times of war and where I was first exposed to fiction by FNMI writers. Since then I have learned many chapters of the dark side of Canadian history that was neglected by the Euro-Canadian elite who controlled the textbooks and curriculum. “Two important elements of the master narrative of Canadian history as it used to be taught in the schools were the superiority of the British form of government and way of life, and the gradual evolution of Canadian society to equal partnership in the imperial enterprise” (Francis 54). Essential to this narrative are the “Textbook Indians” who “[u]ntil the 1960s, . . . were sinister, vicious figures, without history or culture. . . . We were taught that the Indians were savages; that is, beings without civilization—and that the arrival of Europeans in America was a process of discovery and conquest, not contact” (Francis 73). To further justify the decimation of Aboriginal people, early descriptions focused on what they lacked. “These textbooks also depict all indigenous peoples as inferior to Europeans. This universal ‘Indian’ is judged by the standards of European civilization and subsequently described in terms of deficiencies” (Carleton 111). Passages comparing “Indians” to violent animals and drawings of vicious attacks reinforce these stereotypes.

Sadly, my generation can relate to Francis’s summary of our Canadian history experience:

With the exception of Riel, Native people virtually disappear from the early textbooks, having served their purpose of providing a standard against which the superiority of Euro-Canadian civilization was measured. They had given Canadian youngsters like myself a reason to consider our country superior to the United States. And they had provided a rationale for the policy of forced assimilation which the government of our parents was implementing against Native people. No one cared that Textbook Indians were never really taken seriously as distinct cultures. Their contributions to Canadian history are not mentioned in the books. Issues which affect them are not discussed. There are almost no references to the contemporary land question, to the treaties, to life on reserves. It is quite probable that as a student in high school during the 1960s I would not even have known that reserves existed. As in contemporary Canada, so in the textbooks, Indians are marginalized and silenced. Their spirituality is dismissed as nothing more than superstition. Their claims to their traditional territories are never even discussed. (Francis 78)

This was the truth bestowed upon decades of publicly-educated Canadian children, a “truth” that continues to fuel myths and misunderstandings today.

Sean Carleton explains the “imperial narrative” which highlights the success of the British Empire in colonization, noting that “[t]extbook discussions of indigenous peoples are often treated as an ‘undesirable interruption of the narrative,’ usually included in brief introductory chapters describing the ‘Discovery of the Americas’ or outlining the geography of and natural resources of Canada” (110). In essence, Canada created a story—its own story—to justify its treatment of Aboriginal people. Educated in the public school system, most of us grew up only knowing that particular version of history, and it is that legacy that we are trying to

unravel in this generation. As a child, I was told one version—a “white-washed” version—of Canadian history; as an adult, I now struggle to understand the “true story” and, in turn, examine my perceptions and rewrite my story.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission points to the Social Studies curriculum as part of the foundation of the problems that have unfolded—and continue to unfold—between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. As Canadian school children, we learned an inaccurate but “common history” that filled a mandate at the time—however dubious—but that has become increasingly untenable. The repercussions of our mis-education continue to be perpetuated: “In government circles, it makes for poor public policy decisions. In the public realm, it reinforces racist attitudes and fuels civic distrust between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians” (TRC 8). Our history needs to be rewritten to include new versions of old stories. We *can* rewrite history, and school curriculums have certainly evolved to include previously underrepresented perspectives; however, if generations of adults who hold political, educational, and media power have a skewed perception of the role of Indigenous peoples in Canada, then we are doomed to repeat the injustices of the past rather than moving forward in a collective and culturally appropriate manner. There is a danger in not recognizing that the story of Canada “is not presented to be a social construction. It is presented as a realist and essentialized entity with a ‘true’ national past and identity. The problem is the potential that such constructions have to erase a historically dynamic and diverse amalgam of peoples, interests, complex negotiations, notions of, and resistance central to nation-making projects” (McDonald 306). It is time for change. As the TRC asserts, “Canada’s national history in the future must be based on the truth about what happened in residential schools. One hundred years from now, our children’s children and their children must know and still remember this history, because they will inherit

from us the responsibility of ensuring that it never happens again” (16). Thankfully, textbooks are being rewritten, and younger generations are learning a revised version of our nation’s past, but formal education only addresses one piece of the puzzle.

As a teenager, I had never questioned what I was taught about “Native Indians” or the images I saw in popular culture and on souvenir store shelves. I never thought deeply about who they were until I was emotionally moved by a piece of art at Expo ’86 in Vancouver, British Columbia. I have not saved many mementos from my teenage years—the Prince posters, Care Bears, and neon accessories are long gone. However, I have carried the print of Chief Dan George with me for thirty years.

I recall entering the Canadian Pavilion at Expo ’86. I remember little else about the world’s fair, but I do remember that experience. It was the first time I had been truly awestruck. The pavilion was vast, dark, serious, and serene. The ceiling edges curved in—like an igloo, undulating to mimic the Milky Way or the Canadian horizon. Painted—but more like floating, rising, dancing off the wall—was the face of a man. He looked noble, serious, and wise . . . but gentle. I assumed he was a great chief. He commanded that large space, not with fear but with presence—the awe-inspiring power of a gentle spirit who watched over and protected all creatures.

In that moment, this sixteen-year-old girl with back-combed hair and blue eyeshadow was struck by something powerful and incomprehensible. I was moved from ambivalence to reflection. I had had my first encounter with greatness—Chief Dan George (1899–1981), who prophesied the following in his “Lament for Confederation” in 1967:

How long have I known you, Oh Canada? A hundred years? Yes, a hundred years. And many, many more. And today, when you celebrate your hundred years, Oh Canada, I am sad for all the Indian people throughout the land.

For I have known you when your forests were mine; when they gave me my meat and my clothing. I have known you in your streams and rivers where your fish flashed and danced in the sun, where the waters said 'come, come and eat of my abundance.' I have known you in the freedom of the winds. And my spirit, like the winds, once roamed your good lands.

But in the long hundred years since the white man came, I have seen my freedom disappear like the salmon going mysteriously out to sea. The white man's strange customs, which I could not understand, pressed down upon me until I could no longer breathe.

When I fought to protect my land and my home, I was called a savage. When I neither understood nor welcomed his way of life, I was called lazy. When I tried to rule my people, I was stripped of my authority.

My nation was ignored in your history textbooks—they were little more important in the history of Canada than the buffalo that ranged the plains. I was ridiculed in your plays and motion pictures, and when I drank your fire-water, I got drunk—very, very drunk. And I forgot.

Oh Canada, how can I celebrate with you this Centenary, this hundred years? Shall I thank you for the reserves that are left to me of my beautiful forests? For the canned fish of my rivers? For the loss of my pride and authority, even among my own people? For the lack of my will to fight back? No! I must forget what's past and gone.

Oh God in heaven! Give me back the courage of the olden chiefs. Let me wrestle with my surroundings. Let me again, as in the days of old, dominate my environment. Let me humbly accept this new culture and through it rise up and go on.

Oh God! Like the thunderbird of old I shall rise again out of the sea; I shall grab the instruments of the white man's success—his education, his skills—and with these new tools I shall build my race into the proudest segment of your society.

Before I follow the great chiefs who have gone before us, Oh Canada, I shall see these things come to pass. I shall see our young braves and our chiefs sitting in the houses of law and government, ruling and being ruled by the knowledge and freedoms of our great land.

So shall we shatter the barriers of our isolation. So shall the next hundred years be the greatest in the proud history of our tribes and nations. (qtd. in "This Day")

I cannot imagine what Chief Dan George would think about the current state of affairs in Canada, but I am sure he would be saddened by the poor living conditions in First Nations communities, the precarious state of the environment, and the long list of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women. However, I suspect he would be hopeful about the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I think he would be pleased with the Indigenous painters, musicians, and writers who are sharing their cultures and the teachers, lawyers, and politicians who are educating us all. I hope he would see progress in the new millennium.

I purchased a souvenir of that greatness—a print of that mural of Chief Dan George by artist Paul Ygartua. It now hangs in my office at work—one piece in a small collection of Aboriginal prints that I have gathered over the years. Those works of art have been conversation starters: “Where did you get that?” or “I love the bright colours in that picture.” I was once asked

by a student who was curious about my art and book collection if I was of Aboriginal ancestry. I told her, “Not in this lifetime,” and left it at that. What does our art “say” about us? I hope those pieces show that I have an interest in peoples and cultures other than my own—that I am a collector of images and stories and that I am open to learning more.

It is that curiosity that finally emboldened me to ask a First Nations student about the significance of sweetgrass. “Emboldened” is probably too strong a word since most of my early cultural conversations with Aboriginal students were prefaced with a self-deprecating comment such as, “I know I am the stupid white chick, so can I ask you about this?” Of course, I did not realize I was doing it at the time, but I now recognize that my childhood fears and the white woman guilt that I had acquired as an adult learning about Canadian Aboriginal history and its legacy made me uneasy as to how to appropriately open a conversation about culture. Slowly, cautiously, and deliberately, I have made my way to a more culturally comfortable place, and I now understand that I do not want a guilt-laden relationship with Aboriginal students. I alone cannot carry the burden of this country’s racist history and make myself feel inferior. Instead, I strive for relationships based on equality and mutual respect, and so begins my second story.

Meijers and Lengelle posit that “we all learn in response to practical experiences which challenge our concepts and identities and require us to feel, observe, converse about and reflect on those experiences while we co-construct our identities, reframe our experiences and in turn learn to navigate the world of work responsibly and flexibly” (16). This is part of moving from the “first” to the “second story.” I did not realize it at the time, but this is what I was experiencing in my work as a college advisor. I was faced with Aboriginal students who did not fit the stereotypes that I had accepted in childhood and that had been reinforced in school, the media, and popular culture. I had to question not only who these students were but also whom I

thought they were based upon my preconceived prejudices. I had to examine the story with which I had grown up and rewrite it to fit the reality of the people I was encountering and what I was learning about their cultures.

In an article written specifically for academic advisors, entitled “Developing Self-Knowledge as a First Step Toward Cultural Competence,” Karen Archambault states that to be effective, advisors need to explore and develop their cultural competence by understanding and appreciating cultural diversity in themselves and others even though they may feel unprepared and uncomfortable: “[n]egotiating these experiences requires a strong understanding of self—personal identity and background as well as limitations and biases” (185). Once I acknowledged and accepted those limitations and biases, a new world began to unfold before me. The ground on which I had comfortably plodded along shifted as I explored this newfound passion. I want the work I do with students to have an impact. I learn from them and they from me. If I were the same advisor and same person thirteen years later, I would be doing a disservice to my profession and the students I serve, and so continues my second story.

Over the years, the disconnect between what I had been conditioned to believe about Indigenous peoples and what I was actually seeing as I worked with them and got to know them became a bit of an obsession. My views were evolving as my curiosity was ignited, and I started researching and attending workshops and exhibits about residential schools and Aboriginal cultures. Much of what I learned was centered on the prairies where I was raised. I was astonished by the history that surrounded me and my hometown. Highly-regarded Canadian Cree painter Allen Sapp attended a residential school at Onion Lake, only twenty minutes from my childhood home. Resister Big Bear is buried near my summer cabin. The hills that we explored on summer vacation were battle sites. The infamous Frog Lake Massacre involved the deaths of

nine white settlers, not hundreds as I had been led to believe. I saw the land around me no longer as the Saskatchewan prairies but instead as Treaty 6 land, a place grounded in rich culture with a history full of holes and populated by people I truly did not know.

Those people included young Jarita Naistus and her family. In 2005, the murder of this local student made headlines and shook our college community. My colleagues and I attended the funeral on the reserve, the first time I had visited the community as an adult and my first formal Indigenous ceremony. The room was crowded and stifling hot, and the service started late. Our group of college staff was seated uncomfortably close to the front of the hall, so close that from my seat I could see the wounds on her skin in the open casket. We should have been seated at the back of the hall where strangers hide. I felt like an imposter. I really didn't know her, but I was reminded of a co-worker who had told me it's always appropriate to attend a funeral as a sign of respect. I wanted her family and the community to know that the college supported them and, more importantly, that I cared. As part of the ceremony, each woman was given a silk flower. Eleven years later, that purple flower and the funeral card still sit on my office shelf as a reminder of this young woman whose story bears so many similarities to the other Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women of Canada.

Ironically, death can connect us and help break down cultural, educational, and socio-economic barriers. Jarita's death served as a catalyst for me not to wait to try to make a difference in the lives of the young people I served. It helped me break through the cultural barriers and gave me permission to be more vulnerable with students. It also opened the door to new relationships for me with her sisters and their children. This resulted in new ventures: an "Indian taco" sale, our "all nations" club, and the play group I started to bring Aboriginal students and their children together. Officially, none of this was in memory of Jarita; however,

the reality of her death made my desire to connect and make a difference that much stronger. It prompted me to take action, and action is what we need. The TRC final report challenges Canadians to “learn how to practice reconciliation in our everyday lives—within ourselves and our families, and in our communities, governments, places of worship, schools, and workplaces. To do so constructively, Canadians must remain committed to the ongoing work of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships” (21). Personally and professionally, I have allowed myself to be vulnerable and have committed to practice reconciliation; however, along the way my motives have been questioned and my will has been tested.

With no dedicated staff or funding and only the desire to connect Aboriginal students, I tried multiple times to start a club. The goal was simple—to build connections for those who wanted to connect. This can be a political undertaking because some students want a designated space and official group while others do not want to be singled out. Therefore, one wise young man suggested that we change our name from the “First Nations Club” to the “All Nations Club” to acknowledge that everyone was welcome. At our inaugural meeting, I was accused by an older Aboriginal woman of “only doing this because somebody told me I had to.” I was hurt as my good intentions were misconstrued and I felt defensive. At the time, I mumbled a response, but I had no real answer. That night, I wrote the following on the white pages of my leather-bound journal:

How can you—a WHITE woman—tell us what we need?

You know NOTHING about us.

But I know PEOPLE. I understand humanity.

I am not a baby, but as a mother, I know what a baby needs—food and nourishment, warmth, love and care.

I am no longer a child, but as an adult, I know what a child needs—protection from the natural and physical elements, education and knowledge, strength and confidence, play and adventure.

I will never be a man, but as a wife, I know that a man needs a warm meal prepared with love and enjoyed around a table with family; forgiveness and compassion to keep love strong; physical contact to keep passion alive; good conversation and companionship to keep hearts and minds vibrant.

Yes, there are many things I will never be, roads I will never travel, and experiences I will never experience firsthand.

However, as a WOMAN, I have the ability to feel beyond myself and my needs, the ability to feel what others feel and know. Your story will never be my story, but as a character in the drama of life, my own starring role, I have to know the other parts in order to play my role well.

Women—regardless of race or socioeconomics—know other women. That is our unifying characteristic. With that power, we can change the world.

Sadly, power and change were not in the foreseeable future. The group dissolved shortly thereafter. I believed what I wrote that day but was reluctant to participate in group activities once my motives were questioned. I also grew tired of the lack of institutional support. For many years, Aboriginal students did not make the college's priority list. Frontline staff knew that we needed support to retain FNMI students and help them succeed, but money and resources never transpired. Therefore, I chose to work one-on-one in the sanctity of my office space with the spirit of Chief Dan George looking over me.

However, insatiable curiosity and a thirst for knowledge eventually led me out of my office and to the classroom where I met Wes Fineday, a traditional knowledge keeper from Sweetgrass First Nation in Saskatchewan who came to the college as a guest speaker. I first heard Wes speak in the fall of 2014 and was brought to tears by his personal story and cultural teachings delivered in his booming voice. His first formal lesson to me was by email:

thanks for the photos. being moved to tears can be a wonderful thing for it is the emotions which nurture and nourish the soul of a human being. it is the physical [body's] way of showing thankfulness for the gift of having received that for which it has been yearning. . . . to be able to listen and hear at that level is an incredible accomplishment given all the obstacles that have been placed in our way. continue to strive to become the shining example of the potential and power of the [creator's] grand dream. wes

Since that initial encounter, we have had many conversations. At first, I tried to write down every word he shared so that I wouldn't miss a detail. However, I have learned through Wes's storytelling to sit back and listen—truly listen—to the tale in order to glean from it what I need to know and remember. I have also learned that there is rarely a concrete answer to a boldly asked direct question and that lessons come indirectly through stories. Wes enjoys traditional oral storytelling, but the stories are often tied to an activity such as medicine picking or tipi building. Wes has become a cherished friend and mentor who has opened his home and land to me and others thirsting for knowledge.

As a white woman trying to bridge a cultural gap, I have been very concerned about appropriation of culture and overstepping boundaries with students. Wes and I have spoken about that, and whenever I question my intentions or second-guess what I am doing, I am reminded of this bit of wisdom he shared one day: “You are a white horse. I am a brown horse.

We can still pull a cart together.” It is a simple notion that has become my reminder that the role I envision for myself as an advisor making a difference in the lives of Indigenous students is realistic and achievable. As Archambault explains, “By acknowledging gaps in diversity and asking for guidance from those with greater cultural competence, advisors can make significant progress toward their own cultural competence” (186). For me, Wes Fineday has helped build that bridge between cultures. He has shared stories and resources, encouraging me to learn more about Indigenous cultures. He has connected me with others involved in post-secondary education, helping me build a circle of Aboriginal mentors and friends. Empowering me to ask the questions that need to be asked of administration and to reach out to students from a place of compassion, Wes has inspired me to become an active participant in the reconciliation—or “bridge building”—process.

However, I have come to learn that I cannot force my passion and compassion for Aboriginal cultures and students on others. I can, though, ask pointed questions, share articles and resources, and make Indigenous cultural references as appropriate. I changed tactics and became more strategic, dropping comments along the way. I am not leading a revolution, but rather, I am nudging along a reluctant bureaucracy.

I have also learned that I cannot judge others who do not understand the historical injustices and the legacy that those decisions have left for generations of people. Erica-Irene Daes, an academic and United Nations human rights expert, “explain[s] the blindness of Europeans to the wrongs of imperialism and exploitation: ‘You cannot be the doctor if you are the disease.’ She argues that Europeans have suffered the ‘disease of the oppressed consciousness for centuries,’ so the attitudes supporting colonialism have now become normalized” (qtd. in Monchalin 69). Unfortunately, this particular “normalization” perpetuates

ignorance. For example, I have heard peers who are members of the education system utter questions and statements such as the following:

- “What’s the big deal with the residential schools? That was years ago. Why haven’t they gotten over it by now?”
- “So what are we supposed to call them?”
- “How could she just leave her kids behind to come to school?”
- “Really, why do teachers need to learn all this Aboriginal history?”
- “My grandfather was abused in a church-run boarding school too. It wasn’t only Natives, you know.”

The unfortunate reality is that these views are the norm for many people of my generation and our predecessors. I cringe at the ignorance of my fellow “educated” Euro-Canadians, but I cannot judge harshly because I have taken the time to seek knowledge and understanding that they have not yet sought. I was curious and took action. I need to incite cultural curiosity in others so that they too are inspired to learn more and become part of the process of reconciliation. According to the TRC, “there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour. We are not there yet. The relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples is not a mutually respectful one. But, we believe we can get there, and we believe we can maintain it” (7). As I have nudged along—asking, “Why don’t we . . . ?” or “What if we did this?”—progress has been made and will continue to be made. Archambault suggests the following tools and activities for advisors to connect with their diverse students: admitting to gaps in knowledge and seeking to fill those gaps; partaking in relevant professional development opportunities; attending cultural events on and off campus; seeking mentors; advocating on behalf of minority student groups; and making

the office environment welcoming to diverse populations (199–200). Over the years, I have stumbled along and followed that advice, but I am not looking for credit—on this earth at least—for anything I do. I am content to plant the seed, give it a bit of water and enlightenment, and let others nurture it along. I have learned that I cannot make my passion someone else’s, so I have tried to be subtle:

- “Look at what this college is doing They are having a feather ceremony during convocation. Have you ever considered that?”
- “Did you hear about this conference? I think it would be a really good experience.”
- “Check out this article about a traditional garden. They got grants from a few different places, and it became a community project. Isn’t that cool?”
- “We met this amazing group of young Indigenous businesswomen. Maybe we could find some funding to bring them on campus to talk to our students about their experiences.”

These gentle suggestions have proven much more effective than direct demands.

This is the process of planting seeds, an indirect method of persuasion gleaned from my Aboriginal mentors. I have also learned to sit back, listen, and observe. I have been taught that a lesson often comes indirectly, through a story. And sometimes, we need to hear those stories multiple times. Rather than declare that the residential school experience was wrong and harmful, it is more impactful to share the personal story of a residential school survivor, have others listen and reflect upon that, and come to their own conclusions. The power of storytelling brings us full circle, so we can cross the cultural bridge—*âsokan*—together.

And therein lies the power of autoethnography. By using Meijers and Lengelle’s first-to-second story (“writing through transformation”) model as part of my autoethnographic process, I

was able to evaluate my cultural experiences in an honest and purposeful way by reflecting on my perceptions of Aboriginal people from childhood to adulthood. Discussions of intercultural relations can be difficult but are necessary in order to embrace the vulnerability that is an inherent part of this form of writing and personal development. Hopefully, this evokes a response and provides a perspective that may be useful to others who undertake the bridge-building process of reconciliation in their personal and professional lives.



Figure 2. The author learns to build cultural bridges, Sweetgrass First Nation, Saskatchewan. Photo by Wes Fineday, 2015.

Notes

1. A pseudonym has been used.
2. A pseudonym has been used.

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