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# Indigenous Self-Discovery: “Being Called to Witness”

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### Résumé de l'article

This paper presents a reflective topical narrative in a style this author described in researching Irihapeti Ramsden (2003), an Ngai Tahupotiki (Maori) nursing instructor of Aotearoa (New Zealand). It is a reflection on the nature of Indigenous scholar's inquiry, or what Irihapeti Ramsden recognized as an often melancholic journey of self-discovery. It is an attempt to understand how, where, and why colonization has reduced us to dependent remnants of the self-reliant and independent peoples our stories remember. We are collectively creating an alternative voice to colonial lies/myths and calling for the restoration of the human dignity stolen along with lands, resources and human rights. Irihapeti Ramsden (2003) used her own melancholic journey of self-discovery to re-ignite trust and reciprocity between people, and to bring the idea of Cultural Safety to colonial New Zealand, thereby establishing a splendid map for future generations of all spaces in need of decolonization. She was met with considerable resistance in her homeland as she raised awareness of the truth about abuses of power by colonial institutions and bureaucracies. By similarly nagging in often difficult processes of self-discovery Indigenous scholars everywhere are helping to unravel a global inheritance of colonial practice. Reconciliation will only be possible when citizens honour Indigenous people's resistance, resentment and rebellion to European myths of conquest. Indigenous scholars are Being Called to Witness seven generations and to preserve the beauty and strength our ancestors wanted to protect. Our ancestors scarified a great deal, and we must wipe our tears, open our eyes, listen deeply, clear our throats, and raise our strong voices to bear witness to our ancestors' prayers.

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### Indigenous Self-Discovery: “Being Called to Witness”

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*Being called to witness by the Coast Salish and Interior Salish peoples of Canada is an honour, a tradition dating back long before contact with European cultures. Salish peoples' history is an oral history. The role of a witness is to record the message of the event in their hearts and minds, and afterward, remember and validate the special occasion by carrying the message and sharing it with friends, neighbors and community members (Vancouver Olympic Committee, 2009).*

#### Introduction

My deliberation on the above quote, a flyer released by the Vancouver Olympic Committee (2009) prompted my search for the meaning and utility of ‘being called to witness.’ Canadian Indigenous story-restorer, story-recovery expert, and wisdom keeper Lee Maracle answered my query and began a personal exploration of the West Coast Salish practice of “being called to witness” to help create a dialogue on the nature of Indigenous self-discovery for Indigenous scholars and writers. This exploration mirrors a remarkable discourse occurring between mature Indigenous community workers with varied repositories of stories old and new from “Indian Country” who are returning to Canada’s educational institutions, where they are struggling to articulate on the ground insights to Indigenous experience in colonial Canada. However, even with many remarkable wisdom gathering life experiences, I, and many of them are required to appeal academic rejection of unique and

#### Abstract

This paper presents a reflective topical narrative in a style this author discovered in researching Irihapeti Ramsden (2003), an Ngai Tahupotiki (Maori) nursing instructor of Aotearoa (New Zealand). It is a reflection on the nature of Indigenous scholar’s inquiry, or what Irihapeti Ramsden recognized as an often melancholic journey of self-discovery. It is an attempt to understand how, where, and why colonization has reduced us to dependent remnants of the self-reliant and independent peoples our stories remember. We are collectively creating an alternative voice to colonial lies/myths and calling for the restoration of the human dignity stolen along with lands, resources and human rights. Irihapeti Ramsden (2003) used her own melancholic journey of self-discovery to re-ignite trust and reciprocity between people, and to bring the idea of Cultural Safety to colonial New Zealand, thereby establishing a splendid map for future generations of all spaces in need of decolonization. She was met with considerable resistance in her homeland as she raised awareness of the truth about abuses of power by colonial institutions and bureaucracies. By similarly engaging in often difficult processes of self-discovery Indigenous scholars everywhere are helping to unravel a global inheritance of colonial practice. Reconciliation will only be possible when citizens honour Indigenous people’s resistance, resentment and rebellion to European myths of conquest. Indigenous scholars are Being Called to Witness seven generations forward and to preserve the beauty and strength our ancestors wanted to protect. Our ancestors sacrificed a great deal, and we must wipe our tears, open our eyes, listen deeply, clear our throats, and raise our strong voices to bear witness to our ancestors’ prayers.

hard fought ‘lived’ qualifications for admission to graduate studies. My work had taken me into arenas of community development, land claims research, mental health, suicide, child welfare, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and addictions research. None of which appeared to qualify my entry into the hallowed halls of academia. Unfortunately, many of us find that marks in undergraduate work mean more than hard earned life experience and life practice for graduate studies at University of Toronto. Fortunately there have been efforts to challenge the

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barriers that have kept Canada's Indigenous population waiting by the door. Ronald Niezen (2009) made an effort to articulate one of the unique pathways of understanding Indigenous self-discovery has taken in his recent book, *The Rediscovered Self: Indigenous Identity and Cultural Justice*,

*From a construct of international governance representing in the abstract a category of people assumed to be in need of development and inclusion-by-assimilation in the project of the nation-state, the term "indigenous" was subsequently re-engineered to represent the aspirations of a wide array of peoples marginalized by states. It has clearly undergone a significant extension of usage from a legal category to a source of identity. It has acquired a "we." It effectively changed hands and was modified with hopes and expectations of self-determination. Legal sociology, in other words, can be taken hold by its subjects as a source of liberation and collective self-definition (Niezen, 2009:178).*

The above statement captures some of the thoughts I explore and express in this paper regarding my experience as an Indigenous community worker and late arriving scholar. After surviving a 30 year career of First Nations community development work, I made my way through graduate school in an attempt to alter the colonial trajectory unleashed on First Nations within our home and native land now known as Canada. I saw that success for most Indigenous students precludes the idea of graduate studies and inherent opportunities to expand a form of critical analysis for developing leadership skills in a modern context. I believe that First Nations peoples, whether fighting the legacy of colonialism or accessing advanced education for personal, familial and community sharing still face sad barriers to participation in meaningful ways. We are however, called loudly to contribute to 21<sup>st</sup> century demands for collaboration and engagement with our external "host" world. Paradoxically, we are also frozen out of leadership opportunities in our home communities when we lack the traditional knowledge required to assist in restoration of lost traditional knowledge from the colonial siege our ancestors endured. The exclusion of Indigenous scholars at the graduate level also prevents future non-Aboriginal leaders from having an opportunity to engage and know the very people who will sit and negotiate the new relationship demanded of Canada and its Indigenous population. An exploration of how Canadian reserves, which represent artificial homes in terms of the healthy communities that were surrendered to make way for the settlement of Canada, will be "privatized" is a current and 'politically hot' example of that new relationship (Flanagan, 2010). Aboriginal people however, are not going to conveniently disappear into

the Canadian body politic; therefore, Canada and academia must reconcile the damages done by broken Treaties, residential school atrocities, and the mismanagement of Canada's natural wealth (Saul, 2009).

This article is a reflective exercise on a very personal struggle of self-discovery to make sense of the pathos/pathology of colonization. Locating learning modalities that actually honour the sacredness of human relationship, too often undervalued in academia was difficult, and I was forced to find new ways of expression. Theoretical constructs perpetuated by academia are rarely formulated with Cultural Safety pedagogy in mind, and some witnessing simply does not fit the academic model (Ramsden, 2003). Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux represents the best of Indigenous scholarly achievement where giving back to community exceeds an obligation to correct the failures of academia to honour and receive Indigenous world-views as valuable to our future leaders. Her insistence that the expression of "neuro or holistic education" in the classroom means bringing scholars into the community and the community into the classroom, steps well beyond the comfort zone of most academics, and embodies the oral traditions that define Indigenous knowledge exchange at its most fruitful and compelling.

### **Study in the Academy today**

Rampant cultural, historical and social confusion creates many difficult issues for researchers/witnesses at all levels of education when they venture into the unresolved pain and injury of Canada's colonial past. Indigenous peoples are marginalized and invisible in most areas of study. Their history and discourse is normally relegated to special programs like Aboriginal studies, as if Indigenous world-views, knowledge, culture and vision for Canada's future only require mere comma's in course material. These nods feel like inclusion only if a visible, vocal and courageous 'Indian' finds a seat in the class. Indigenous students' experience within the academy is reminiscent of a 'Dickensish' tale. It is often a tale of two extremes at the best of times and at the worst of times simultaneously becomes a lesson and a lonely burden of responsibility to challenge the shame and humiliation of each racist, ignorant and arrogant colonial myth perpetuated; but like *Oliver Twist* we want more than poverty.

### **Poverty or Richness Undefined?**

In that light, the extreme circumstances of poverty in First Nations is a testament of stolen lands, stolen human rights to self-determination and stolen communities, or as Lee Maracle teaches "places we would want to stand under" (Maracle, 2009). Jan Longboat (2009) defined 'poorness' in

terms of elders identifying suffering people who had lost the richness of collective reciprocity and interdependence. She identified those who failed to follow culturally imperative teachings and learn the traditional skills necessary to provide a good life for themselves and their families. The loss of natural sovereignty meant citizens equipped with exceptional abilities to share beyond individual needs lost the ability to help in times of need; good will was replaced with tyranny and domination. Dispossession and dependency on hand-outs replaced efficacy and resilience. It is impossible to fully grasp the transfer of poverty from refugees to those seeking refuge from the atrocities of Canada's colonial history without a thorough inquiry into the landlords of cultural destruction that were visited upon a once independent and self-sufficient peoples. Canada is very much in need of a truth telling on the destructive impacts of racist, sexist, and oppressive Indian agents through the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Indigenous Inquiry and Being Called to Witness**

My graduate school education eventually provided a path-way of influence and engagement with my academic peers. Together, I could see how we could inform, uninformed mainstream educated Canadians about the harsh realities of their colonial history on First Nations, especially those in Canada's vast northern backyard. I saw first hand how they have been “shielded from truths” so their governments could maintain their perverse domination over the Indigenous populations of Canada (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2010). I was constantly reminded that not having the proper credentials also limited the value of my ‘lived’ knowledge and experience. I found walking the talk of those who talk the talk a confusing struggle. Being raised on a travelling carnival had prepared me to protect myself from others “running the alibi” for predatory domination (Koptie, 2009), but acquiescence to “colonial imperialism” was demanded (Battiste, 2002). Indigenous peoples remain trapped and assumed followers of that tired dance. Being called to witness is re-learning how we once led our own dances and successfully locked them into strong good hearts and strong good minds. Thankfully, I was welcomed by the Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement (SAGE) group of University of Toronto who advocated for recognition of the contributions my generation of social workers could make from within the walls of academia. They are pulling down systemic barriers to Indigenous knowledge gaining recognition as vital to the truth and reconciliation healing work Canada stubbornly avoids. We assert that community development research work in First Nations communities must look at the social, economic, political, spiritual upheavals that the

‘reservationization’ of Canada's Indigenous peoples have had on our sense of well-being. Indigenous peoples were relocated to temporary, intentional marginalized and mostly uninhabitable plots of surplus lands. These mostly small and enclosed reserves were governed by the colonial Canadian Indian Act of 1876. This incarceration represents the “after this nothing happened” aspect of our circumstances (Lear, 2006). The necessary unveiling of this story requires witnesses and impact statements on spaces and places Indigenous scholars have not long inhabited. Reliance on the ignorance and arrogance of colonial representations of Canada's historical, economic, political and spiritual identity are troublingly unfair and false (Saul 2009), because too much of Canada's history supports white supremacy notions of savages in need of civilization. The real story belies the actual frontier experiences too long hidden in one sided historical telling of Canada's nation-building/ destructing. Depending on the vantage point taken poverty is often seen as deserved for failing to adjust to progress or, poverty can simply be seen as the price Indigenous people pay to cling to ancestral self-determination. Their determination to follow the instructions of thousands of generations of survivors within their traditional homelands has indeed been costly.

Is the addictive tendency toward dependency on reserves somehow related to a forced relinquishment of power to engage in warfare? Or, perhaps related to the impotency of rebelling against the oppression of the Canadian Indian Act? Why and how do resistance, resentment and rebellion become internalized? Do traumatic experiences replace ceremony, celebration and carrying in our hearts the cultural gifts a good life once witnessed and carried forward? Yet as my introductory quote highlights, our people carried other elements of the past forward as well. Still, far too many Canadians are shielded from the alternative experiences of resilience based culture transfer in the historical settlement/ community foundations in our territories. The gaps in understanding of what has unfolded in the past 150 years are unconscionable.

### **Decolonization?**

Indigenous survivors of colonial excess remain stark witnesses of injustices waiting for compassionate reception. An inclusive historical revision of Canada's true identity is long overdue. Cultural, political, social, economic and spiritual reclamation is well underway not just in Canada but globally; witness the United Nations 2007 adoption of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Canada's path to becoming a credible modern state must include the de-colonization aspirations of Indigenous peoples in Canada's backyard. Plundering wealth from stolen lands, like on Pandora in James Cameron's recent



movie *Avatar*, will always draw out the real “Defenders of the Land” such as Mohawk Indigenous activist Ben Powless (2010). Powless bears witness as a remarkable new generation of de-colonization agents of change, with global reach. The tar sands, gold mines, diamond mines, oil fields and hydro dams are situated on Indigenous lands and under Treaty terms that can no longer be dismissed or ignored. This author was a cultural advisor on a recent, February 2010 Canadian Roots youth exchange to Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation. That First Nation is situated in the “Ring of Fire, a mineral deposit in northern Ontario that the Ontario government in its 2010 Throne Speech, identified as the greatest mineral discovery in a century. Chief Connie Gray-McKay of that remote First Nations told our group, “we’re tired of being the sandwich, we want to be the plate,” to express the frustration of watching wealth extracted from their traditional lands that does nothing to alleviate the heart wrenching poverty in their community. There is a worldview locked within those Treaties, and it speaks to an intentionality to protect those lands and to survive many more generations ahead. One of this author’s most glorious experiences in graduate studies was researching the field notes, journal entries and recordings of Elder’s stories by Abraham Maslow, Lucien Hanks and Jane Richardson from their 1938 anthropologic visit, with supervision by Ruth Benedict, to Blackfoot territory in Alberta. They were able capture detailed witness impact accounts which contained valuable insights to Canada’s intentionality in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Legacy of Scott

Treaty “negotiations” included threats of American style genocide and starvation, and were a part of Duncan Campbell Scott’s bureaucratic tactics to get rid of Indians and gain access to valuable oil fields and gold. The world has long been called to witness the actual “Indigenous-colonizer relations” out of those ‘visits’ that *Avatar* successfully managed to capture allegorically (Powless, 2010).

Duncan Campbell Scott deserves more scrutiny than most Canadian historians provide and would surely fit the criteria for a villain role-model for James Cameron’s movie *Avatar*. His tenure at the Department of Indian Affairs represents the pathos of colonial inertia. Most Canadians are not taught about D. C. Scott the famous poet and creator of Canadian cultural genocide for Indigenous peoples across Canada’s north, south, east and west. Scott exemplified a Victorian racial, social, cultural and spiritual superiority that flowed from social-Darwinism and prerogative power myths that permitted the conceiving of policies by bureaucrats to define state objectives like,

*I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact. That this country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone... Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill (MacKenzie, 2009:91).*

Indigenous peoples surely never wanted to be refugees in their own lands, living in squalid conditions, and having their children ripped away from them, while the instigator and purveyor of those atrocities was writing poetry. Indigenous scholars and writers must do valiant inquiry into the thoughts of men like Duncan Campbell Scott’s who unabashedly unleashed terror and trauma in the past century against their ancestors and across their homelands.

Alice Miller’s remarkable book, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, guides the locating of a reflective topical biography on Adolf Hitler’s psycho-social human development and the abusive childhood he experienced. Unresolved intergenerational flaws were likely significant in a life that spawned a final solution for racial hatred. Adolf Hitler’s fascination with cowboys and Indians and his acting out behaviors led to the Holocaust. That figurative Trail of Tears saw an effort to destroy a whole population. Patterns of ‘conquest’ in the new world may have provided a tragic model for colonization and genocide worldwide. Indigenous writers will find paths of truth when studying writers like Alice Miller, as they seek to critically frame what happens when men like Duncan Campbell Scott round up Indigenous children and place them in places of “poisonous pedagogy” (Miller, 2002). Our lives remain haunted, our ability to flourish impeded, and our First Nations are still recovering from the intergenerational traumatic impacts of historic injustices, just like others around the globe.

### Abraham Maslow the Father of Self-Actualization

It was 1938 when Hitler’s aspirations for colonial dominance unfolded throughout Europe. In northern Alberta, a future famous 20<sup>th</sup> century humanist social scientist named Abraham Maslow was then a graduate student and being sent by Ruth Benedict to investigate a waning tribe of Indians on the Prairies of Canada. Benedict sought to capture, observe, and preserve anthropological data before civilization destroyed the Indians’ way of life and very existence (1934). It is vital for reconciliation that a new generation of Indigenous inquiry takes stock of truths from that fateful 1938 excursion into Indian Country by Maslow, Hanks and Richardson. What

that team recorded has everything to do with exposing the big lie that Canada is willing to be a fair country. Maslow spoke clearly to an understanding that the oil of Alberta belonged to all Canadians and that it was time for the benefits of that oil to contribute to ending Indigenous poverty. Maslow claimed that in 1938 and again in 1967. What has the Canadian government had to say in response?

Preliminary review of field notes and later journal recordings by Maslow and his research team demonstrate their experience had an important impact on the development of Maslow's concepts of humanist psychology. His early work on hierarchies is a vital record for Indigenous scholars from at least two perspectives. First, it confirms inherent cultural resilience against the historic experience of colonization and Western dominant culture rationalizations. Secondly, it raises questions about potential distortions and misappropriation of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews. Maslow's experience among the Blackfoot "Indians" of Alberta provides a mostly hidden record of valuable meta-narratives lost in a quest for scholarly knowledge through the study of "primitive" people. However, his recorded stories and witness statements are also gifts to the Blackfoot people of Alberta who were struggling to maintain traditional ways of living on top of rich oil fields. Maslow heard narratives of the destruction of buffalo herds, the reluctance to sign treaties; gold and oil rush encroachments as well as racist conduct by settlers. Promises of sharing, friendship and peace from faith in treaties never came true. Maslow writes many years later,

*"I came into the reservation with the notion that the Indians are over there on a shelf, like a butterfly collection or something like that. And then slowly I shifted and changed my mind. Those Indians on the reservation were decent people; and the more I got to know the whites in the village, who were the worst bunch of creeps and bastards I've ever run across in my life, the more it got paradoxical. Which was the asylum? Who are the keepers and who the inmates? Everything got mixed up" (Hoffman, 1998:119).*

Oil would ultimately make Canada very wealthy, but paradoxically impoverish the population that resided over the oil-fields. The economic development of Alberta was gained through Victorian precepts of prerogative power myths and destructive disregard of the Blackfoot people. Maslow saw Alberta as one of the most racist places he had ever been to, and I found myself in wonderment at the stories they recorded on the Treaty making process. By the time the Canadian government completed the Treaty process in Alberta the Indian Affairs Department under Duncan Campbell Scott decided Treaties were not required for British Columbia. The

Dominion of Canada evolved from the Christian Doctrine of Discovery based on the conquest of no man's land or "Terra Nullius." Terra Nullius was a prerogative proclamation by imperial Britain that its colonies were lands of unoccupied territories until white settlement found them, a clear breach of international law, and requiring greater research input from Indigenous perspectives (Arnold, 2007). The entrenchment of social, political, economic and cultural bias during the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was supported by researchers of Maslow's generation. This debate is not about Indigenous contributions to modern psychology, but about the silence undermining Indigenous people socially and politically in the name of advancing Euro-centric scholarly expertise. Maslow would become the father of motivation while the people of the Blood Reserve would descend further into cycles of dependency, despair and loss. By 1967, only one generation away from his 1938 six week visit, Maslow was hearing narratives from a new generation of graduate students who bore witness to the addictions and violence that were fast becoming the new social norms of the Blood community.

### A.D. Fisher and Next Generation Witnesses

On hearing descriptions of marginalization and despair he later challenged one of his graduate students, A. D. Fisher (1984) to get the truth into the academic literature. Fisher wrote an essay entitled "Indian Land Policy and the Settler State in Colonial Western Canada" which incorporates his shared field work with Maslow. Fisher (1984) calls for explanations of "how and why the outcome of "reservationization" turned out to be Indian underdevelopment in "the bountiful land of Alberta" (Fisher 1984). The launching of inquiry processes to locate under researched meta-narratives and hidden stories from that visit began with Fisher. Uncovering the truths in their work as well as the mistakes of colonization becomes the new prerogative for Indigenous scholars. The ending of the one sided articulation of impacts on social, political, economic and political upheavals and the Indigenous expression of colonial settlement is imbedded in these witness accounts. The losses of land experienced by the Aboriginal peoples, and the scars of the Alberta oil sands are a perfect metaphor to Canada's colonial wounded soul that hides an addiction to devastation, destruction and disregard for future generations in the name of greed. New generations of Indigenous story-tellers have many arrows to fire at the myths of Canadian claims to be a fair country (Saul 2008). It is a worthy endeavor for future generations of Indigenous scholars and on the ground experts to seek out traditional wisdom through restoring traditional intergenerational inquiry. One of my heroes Métis scholar Olive Dickason offers a guide to Indigenous inquiry,

*My goal has always been to present the situation as it actually was... and to recognize the actual role of the Indians in our history... their Fundamental role. The point is to try and make that [clear](Gorman in Valaskakis et. al., 2004:133).*

### Indigenous Scholars as Pathfinders

I challenge all scholars to further research/inquire into the historic, political, economic and spiritual 'witness experiences' of the father of understanding basic human needs and self-actualization. Indigenous scholars must explore and express the "After This Nothing Happened," realities in places like Alberta where stolen lands have become a global battle of sustainability and the preservation of our Mother Earth (Lear, 2006; Koptie, 2009). Indigenous scholars must also be vigilant and vibrant, and think critically about the intentionality of non-Aboriginal scholars like Tom Flanagan (2010) who seek to "run alibis" to silence First Nations peoples' ability to resist such excesses (Koptie, 2009).

The re-searching for truths that honour Indigenous worldviews long dormant in most colonial historical interpretations of Canada's identity as a modern nation state that the world should esteem, denies the painful recollections and intergenerational traumatic experiences of a new generation of Indigenous writers for which Lee Maracle created a path. It is imperative that decolonizing, post-colonial and racially inclusive academic literature includes these narratives (Koptie, 2009). Kanienkehaka (Mohawk) scholar Taiaiake Alfred (2005) in his Warrior treatise, *Wasase: Indigenous pathways of action and freedom*, provides an invaluable context to Indigenous scholars,

*Decolonization ... is a process of discovering the truth in a world created out of lies. It is thinking through what we think we know to what is actually true but is obscured by knowledge derived from experiences as colonized peoples ... our struggle is with all forms of political power, and to this fight, we bring our only real weapon: the power of truth (Alfred, 2005:280).*

Indigenous scholars play vital roles as path-finders and mentors. Navigating the rigors of often culturally unsafe academic environments that remain foreign, perplexing and not yet ready for some of the stories coming in from "Indian country" is difficult and challenging to even the most courageous (Koptie, 2009). There is however, splendid reflexivity in identifying as an Indigenous scholar. Demystifying ridiculous misconceptions and worn out rationalizations of white dominance and white supremacy flowing from Victorian age myths of British hegemony, imperialism and a perverse sense of entitlement to privilege is the modern

warrior's way of re-contextualizing colonization. The inquiry approach Indigenous scholars and writers must take is first of self-discovery (Ramsden, 2003). When we uncover the intentionality of our ancestors in the face of conquest and the untold stories from Treaty making as "living to fight another day" we can fully grasp the unlimited opportunities they prepared for us.

### Being Called to Witness: The Survivors Generation

Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux currently holds the first Banff Centre Nexen Chair in Aboriginal Leadership and describes herself as coming from a "family of residential school survivors" (Sawyer, 2010). This strategic appointment allows her to seek common ground in First Nation communities in order to re-enliven the fact that "we have our own ways" and use "wise practices" to define our lives (Wesley-Esquimaux and Snowball, 2010). Wesley-Esquimaux has devoted her life to "Changing the Face of Aboriginal Canada" and was nominated for the Federal Liberal Party in 2009 as a candidate in the York-Simcoe Riding where her home community, Georgina Island First Nation is situated. She is seeking a position of influence to expand her reach to the leaders of Canada to "re-script the future within our communities and in how our communities are perceived by the general population" (Sawyer, 2010). Wesley-Esquimaux has helped develop a ground-breaking youth engagement program called The Canadian Roots Exchange, which is designed to bring together youth/witnesses; First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and non-Indigenous with Aboriginal communities across Canada in a spirit of reciprocity, honoring and friendship. Students seek positive opportunities for unity and record what they learn through film, story exchanges, photography and lively debate. In 2009, the Canadian Roots program created a documentary on the lessons they learned from hearing stories from residential school survivors which they titled *Shielded Minds* (shieldedminds.ca). This video acknowledges that formal education has shielded their minds from the historical realities of Canada's Indigenous peoples and the impacts of the failed assimilation policies of their country.

Expressing the need for inquiry and witnessing in places outside academia means that Indigenous scholars like Wesley-Esquimaux take a different path from many Euro-Canadian scholars. She uses her social capital with First Nations to create path-ways into a modern form of education still unavailable through-out most of Canada. In her experience, institution bound scholars too readily confine knowledge in the 'bird cages' of institutionalized education where ideology is cornered in the residential school model. Sami Scholar, Rauna Kuokkanen (2007) also explores the struggle for legitimacy



## Indigenous Self-Discovery: "Being Called to Witness"

and alternative ways of educational inquiry through an Indigenous lens,

*People are related to their physical and natural surroundings through their genealogies, their oral traditions, and their personal and collective experiences with certain locations. Interrelatedness is also reflected in many indigenous peoples' systems of knowledge. These systems are commonly explained in terms of relations and are arranged in a circular format that consists mainly (if not solely) of sets of relationships whose purpose is to explain phenomena. In many of these systems of knowledge, concepts do not stand alone; rather, they are constituted of "the elements of other ideas to which they were related" (Kuokkanen, 2007:32).*

Rauna Kuokkanen is a figurative 'gift exchange' from the Indigenous peoples of Norway and Finland to Canadian Indigenous university students. Her work is in the area of colonial pedagogy and Indigenous studies, and she is a guest lecturer at the University of Toronto in Aboriginal Studies. The contextual framework for this paper was located in Rauna Kuokkanen's (2007) book, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes [Worldviews] and the Logic of the Gift*. Kuokkanen elegantly probes the lack of Indigenous perspectives, narratives and context in academia,

*The university remains a contested site where not only knowledge but also middle-class, Eurocentric, patriarchal, and (neo) colonial values are produced and reproduced ... the academy is one of the main sites for reproducing hegemony. Not surprisingly, then, the studied silence and willful indifference surrounding the "indigenous" continues unabated in most academic circles. In the same way that indigenous peoples (and their epistemes [worldviews]) remain invisible when the nation-states were shaped, indigenous scholarship remains invisible and unreflected in most academic discourses, including that of some of the most progressive intellectuals (Kuokkanen, 2007:156).*

Yes, times they are a changing rapidly, especially the racial realities in author Vine Deloria Jr.'s America. Watkins (2006) in remembrance of Vine Deloria, Jr. who entered the spirit world November 13, 2005 stated:

*"Two things influenced me to take a pro-indigenous stance in archaeology. The first of these were my Pawnee friends who ... made me aware of how Native People felt about anthropologists and archaeologists. The second was Vine Deloria's book Custer Died for Your Sins. Clearly what he wanted was to challenge us and forbid us the comfort of*

*our complacency. He was successful doing these two things (Watkins, 2006:506).*

Of even more recent vintage, a child of the civil rights rebellion, President Barack Obama, has enlivened the truth and reconciliation debate across Turtle Island [North America] and Indigenous people can see transformative signs of hope in his ascension to influencing America's place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His pledge to re-visit America's obstruction and non-endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples follows Australia and New Zealand change of heart on their colonial pasts; leaving Canada the lone hold-out of denial and shameful conduct. The National Episcopal Church of America which Vine Deloria Jr.'s father Vine Sr. was an archdeacon and missionary on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in South Dakota has made a similar concession. During its July 2009 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention in Anaheim, California the Church passed a groundbreaking landmark resolution repudiating the validity of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery that led to the colonizing dispossession of the lands of Indigenous peoples around the planet. Onondaga First Nation woman Tonya Gonnella Frichner, an attorney and founder of the American Indian Law Alliance and North American Representative to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, at the Ninth Session April 19-30, 2010 submitted a report titled; "Impact on Indigenous Peoples of the International Legal construct known as the Doctrine of Discovery, which has served as the Foundation of the Violation of their Human Rights." All Indigenous scholars must join in the remarkable efforts globally being undertaken to demystify the dehumanization through Christian 'Doctrine' that continues to haunt mankind. Her summary of that important paper begins with,

*This preliminary study establishes that the Doctrine of Discovery has been institutionalized in law and policy, on national and international levels, and lies at the root of the violations of indigenous peoples' human rights, both individual and collective. This has resulted in state claims to and the mass appropriations of the lands, territories, and resources of indigenous peoples. Both the Doctrine of Discovery and a holistic structure that we term the Framework of Dominance have resulted in centuries of virtually unlimited resource extraction from the traditional territories of indigenous peoples. This, in turn, has resulted in the dispossession and impoverishment of indigenous peoples, and the host of problems that they face today on a daily basis (Frichner, 2010).*

The Episcopal Church of America also at its July 2009 gathering called on Queen Elizabeth II to "disavow, and repudiate publicly, the validity of the Christian Doctrine of



Discovery” (Miller, 2009). Miller (2009) poses a long overdue paradigm shift to re-tell, review and re-negotiate notions of the prerogative power myths (Arnold, 2007). These are the myths that permeate many social structures of race, culture, gender and religion that sustain the paternalistic guardian/ward relationships of Indigenous peoples within the “Promised Land,”

*Even if these dramatic events never take place, however, the Episcopal Church has taken a valuable and courageous step by focusing Americans and the world on how European Christians used international law to dominate indigenous peoples and to dispossess them of their lands and assets. Will other Christian churches and the international community have the same courage to look at the foundations, histories and laws that helped create European domination of indigenous peoples? (Miller, 2009:3)*

These messages are significant as Canadian Indigenous scholars valiantly search for similar stories of resilience and strength in contemporary Canada to demystify the place of ‘Indians’ in Canada. They know that it is only a self-recovery of identity and human dignity that will allow the restoration of pride in their nations. Cook-Lynn (2007) addresses this quest to locate safe places of connecting to those stories in her important work *Anti-Indianism in Modern America: Voice from Tatekeya’s Earth*, where she writes about the obligation of Indigenous scholars to project strong voices to people who “believe in the stereotypical assumption that Indians are ‘damned,’ vanished, or pathetic remnants of a race” and cries of “let’s get rid of Indian reservations” or “let’s abrogate Indian treaties.” Instead of feeling inspired to find places of good will, she notes that far too much energy is sapped escaping spaces of hate, indifference and inexcusable ignorance. Marie Battiste (2002) challenges Canadian academic institutions to take leadership roles in locating truths and reconciling the gaps in academic and intellectual inquiry of colonial wrongs and seeks to create collaboration across cultural divides to,

*... support the agenda of Indigenous scholarship, which is to transform Eurocentric theory so that it will not only include and properly value Indigenous knowledge, thought, and heritage in all levels of education, curriculum, and professional practice but also develop a cooperative and dignified strategy that will invigorate and animate Indigenous languages, cultures, knowledge, and vision in academic structure. (MacKenzie, 2009:93)*

## We Have Been Called to Witness

This paper on reflective topical narrative mirrors my return to graduate studies in my fifth decade after a melancholic journey of self-discovery. As with most of my peers we carry a heavy burden of demystifying ridiculous misconceptions and worn out rationalizations of white dominance and white supremacy flowing from Victorian age myths. Political and academic Pirates continue to plunder riches from foreign places by renaming their destructive tendencies as progressive civilization. History is repetitive. Yet we are often pressured to produce a record of why Indigenous peoples of Canada continue to fail. Now, those early concepts have moved to ‘integration’ as opposed to ‘assimilation’ into the Canadian body politic. How do we articulate colonial poverty and *inferiorized* communities? How does Indigenous scholarly inquiry into colonial myths find space in an academia more concerned with perpetuating colonial inertia? Returning to the wisdom of Vine Deloria Jr. (2006) in his call for spiritual re-discovery in his book, *The World We Used to Live In*, we are warned;

*This uncritical acceptance of modernism has prevented us from seeing that higher spiritual powers are still alive in the world ... We need to glimpse the old spiritual world that helped, healed, and honoured us with its presence and companionship. We need to see where we have been before where we should go, we need to know how to get there, and we need to have help on our journey (Hall, 2008:157-158).*

To be able to research, record and re-tell truths about unsustainable fallacies is to realize the eternal hope of survival that the Indigenous people continue to hold across Turtle Island [North America]. Aboriginal peoples are determined to not disappear under the weight of by the cultural, political, social and spiritual devastation of colonial inertia (Sefa Dei et al, 2000). Indigenous scholars are tasked to address this ‘crisis of knowledge’ by re-telling the tragic consequences of the past seven generations in a voice that resonates with resilience and pride. That which created the inequities of caring, sharing and loving will not continue as we courageously witness and articulate the limits of survivability which continues to resonate in the souls of all Indigenous people who continue to mourn their paradoxical civilization. Cathy Caruth (1995) in her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* created an important anthology of informative and sensitive essays on inquiry through witness memory exploration that might become a guidebook for Indigenous scholars/witnesses wanting frameworks of compassionate reflective autobiographic narrative for assisting recovery from crimes against humanity such as the residential school experience. Dori Laub

(1995) challenges all humanity to accept responsibility for the inconvenient truths of “events that produced no witnesses,”

*A witness is a witness to the truth of what happens during an event. During the era of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, the truth of the event could have been recorded in perception and in memory, either from within or from without, by Jews, or any one of a number of “outsiders.” Outsider-witnesses could have been, for instance, the next door neighbor, a friend, a business partner, community institutions including the police and the courts of law, as well as bystanders and potential rescuers and allies from other countries (Laub in Caruth, 1995:64).*

Canada must eventually reconcile its painful colonial legacy. This will require a massive and collective grieving of the stories of intergenerational trauma now deeply locked in the memories of all Canada’s Indigenous peoples (Saul, 2009). Remember, we are not that distant from Holocaust survivors who struggled to bear witness to the worst crimes humanity could permit. Truth and reconciliation will be a call to all of Canada to witness the suffering by colonization of the Indigenous peoples of “our home and native land.” The melancholic journey of reconstituting a culture, a right to self-determination and natural sovereignty holds valuable lessons for Indigenous peoples everywhere under siege as distinct peoples.

Two lengthy witness accounts follow (see Appendix A) by Canadians who responded on-line to an inquiry by the Canadian Broadcast Corporation; “Did you or a family member attend a residential school?” and “Send us your stories.” These are responses elicited by Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s June 11, 2008 apology for Indian Residential Schools. In the Canadian Parliament, he termed residential schools a “sad chapter of Canadian history.” The appended accounts honour the format of so many witness accounts and provide insights to how people integrate intergenerational traumatic experiences. Often scholars are admonished for lengthy quotes that ‘distract’ readers. Just as deep listening skills are required for reconciliation and forgiveness this author feels that presenting entire quotes honours the way stories are collected. Indigenous scholars face a dilemma in compromising alternative narratives that respect the style Indigenous wisdom transfer takes from the ground up. This author is still learning to balance academic expectations with maintaining the integrity of voice. There are so many silenced stories that desperately need releasing and are waiting for compassionate inquiry. They will only be heard through kind human reciprocity and with the good will of “being called to witness.”

### **We are all “Being Called to Witness.”**

Canada will choose peaceful reconciliation or disruptive confrontations over unshared land, resources and wealth that challenge both sovereignty and social order. It is painfully perplexing that even within our institutions of learning so little truth of the legacy of colonization resonates through issues of class, race, and gender. The debate on the very future of humanity comes from survivors of colonial excess and the perpetuation of myths of power and control triumphing over creating Cultural Safety and inclusion. What is reconciliation in a country where so few citizens know what went on in residential schools? On April 27, 2010 The Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair the Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), at the Ninth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues called for a ten year initiative for an International Roundtable on Truth Commissions. In his speech titled “For the child taken, for the parent left behind,” he explained the TRC mandate to global witnesses,

*The TRC is not here to lay blame, or to determine guilt. We cannot compel testimony or grant immunity. We do not decide compensation. There are others who do that.*

*We are here to determine our future as a nation. Our first obligation is to show the true and complete story of residential schools.*

*The history of residential schools is likely the least known dimension of Canadian history. It is not taught in our schools. It is not commemorated anywhere in our country or in our national capital. The 150 year history of residential schools has not been made a part of our national memory. It has been ignored or, worse dismissed.*

*What is known however to most Canadians is the present legacy: that Indigenous peoples in Canada do not have the same standard of life that is enjoyed by mainstream Canada. They easily fall into the trap of blaming Indigenous people for the conditions in which they live and for failing to address their problems adequately. That blaming leads inevitably to disrespect. That disrespect however also comes from the many generations of public policy founded on the view that white Euro-Canadians were superior, a view supported by law and taught in schools to Indigenous and non-Indigenous and non-Indigenous student alike (Sinclair, 2010).*

Are Canadians ready to hear true stories of infanticide and crimes against humanity where children were victimized to punish a whole race of peoples for being slow to ‘civilize’? And who can call what is narrated by Indigenous survivors civilized?

These long overdue questions represent a new inquiry into why in a land of bounty we have Third World and Fourth World poverty. It is because, "there is no real poverty in this country; there is simply excessive greed?" Or, perhaps what many elders would simply call a profound "poverty of spirit." The lands that Aboriginal peoples live on are often economically unsustainable because Aboriginal peoples cannot hunt on grossly disturbed lands or fish for food in polluted waters. Most Canadians deem inhabitable lands that most Indigenous peoples call home because of forced historical homeland dispossession. Canada's growing reputation of reckless mining practices around the globe establish this country as ready for collective intervention by nation-states determined to stop the exploitation and marginalization of Indigenous peoples globally. Canada refused to endorse and sign onto the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people, and Canada appears unwilling to acknowledge its colonial past, confirmed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statement on September 25, 2009 at the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh that, "We're so self-effacing as Canadians that we sometimes forget the assets we do have that other people see ... we are one of the most stable regimes in history ... **we also have no history of colonialism.** So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great powers, but none of the things that threaten or bother them. Canada is big enough to make a difference, but not big enough to threaten anybody. And that is a big asset if properly used." Canada continues to minimize and control what rights Indigenous Canadians will be offered, and the Canadian government will want to retain control of the economic levers that would provide true self-governance and sustainability. Do we recognize that statements like this demonstrate Canada's natural sovereignty to be as fragile as Aboriginal Canada's? Canada's Indigenous population is building the capacity to fill the void of Canadian indifference to its obligations, to extend human rights to all its citizens, and expose the truths of Canada's dismissive political agenda.

The Canadian Arctic has lately become the new frontier for extending colonial power over Indigenous people. Canada has until 2013 to challenge Russian assertion before the United Nations that Canada does not have sovereignty over large portions of its north. Canada's claim to territorial integrity on its northern boundaries requires a new engagement with its Indigenous peoples. The next 50 years of Canadian geo-political, economic and spiritual existence may become the 'Greatest Show on Earth' (Koptie 2009). Natural sovereignty is the ability to sustain territorial, social, political, economic and spiritual integrity across time and place.

Jan Longboat (2009) directs us to maintain 'good living and good minds' as we only exist in the now, now and now. Our

past and our future are reflected in how we conduct ourselves in the present, and many other Indigenous elders reiterate concepts of inclusion and being called to witness not only for our own nations, but globally. Indigenous knowledge has maintained path-ways of sustainability and respect for future generations who are the intended beneficiaries of what we do today. Elder Merle Beedie (1993) references the many voices that our lives and communities speak through on healing from the violence that conflict at home and in our lands have generated,

*The next 500 years are for Native people ... Promote talking circles, teaching circles, healing circles to the Native and the Non Native communities. Promote healing lodges in our territories; develop all forms of teaching materials for the schools, TV programs, plays for the theatres, movies, et cetera., et cetera. Educate all the community about our history and the part we played in this and they have to match roles; we did survive together. Get your women into politics of our communities and nations and support women's groups whenever and wherever in our communities because they are our life givers, they are our peace keepers, they are our faith keepers (Beedie, 1993).*

The ultimate gift of higher learning for Indigenous scholars is the challenge to re-write, re-vise, re-tell and recover stories, meta-narratives and the wisdom of our ancestors. We are already engaged in adapting from victims to survivors and moving towards "victorizing our lived experiences," "becoming victorious, strong and re-membering where our hearts belong is imperative to our reconstitution as nations" (Wesley-Esquimaux 2009). As a community helper and late scholar, this author has been honoured to "be called to witness" hundreds of survivor's stories that have helped frame my worldview and professional life. I have gratefully joined forces with a growing number of Indigenous scholars, writers, and wisdom keepers to support leaders like Dr. Cynthia-Wesley Esquimaux in her extraordinary bid to "Change the Face of Aboriginal Canada."

*"So gently I offer my hand and ask*

*Let me find my talk*

*So I can teach you about me."*

Rita Joe, 1988

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## Appendix A

*Did you or a family member attend a residential school?*

### **RW (posted June 13, 2008)**

*I appreciated the Prime Minister's Apology on behalf of the Government and Canada; any emotion shown was welcomed, as my family also suffered the rippling effects of devastation.*

*They suffered in silence and shame as though responsible for what happened to them. Recently, my grandmother, now 88 years old, told of her experience in residential school: as a little girl she cried herself to sleep every night until she became sick, her sisters ran away with her taking turns carrying her on their backs, they were all punished; her parents whom she loved were called "savages"; she had to pick dandelions for lunch and would gag on the boiled greens; she witness a nun fighting with a girl and her habit coming off revealing her bald head; she stayed awake all night afraid to wet the bed and be humiliated as others were; she would do the dishes for the nuns and priests and realize how well they ate; and her 14 year old sister died of complications after a nun threw a kettle of boiling water on her chest.*

*My dad and his brothers and sisters grew up in the same residential school. He never talked about his experience. My dad died in 1969 at 42 years old; I was 12. Although very talented, he had a lot of problems. All his brothers died young.*

*These priests and nuns represented God to these children (although a false one) and therefore it was spiritual abuse as well; how many children suffered and died believing that even God hated and disapproved of them. The real God would not take children away from their families and abuse them mentally, physically, emotionally or sexually and it is not God's intention that children be ashamed or abused just for being who He created them to be. I pray the rest of Canada will stop hating Native people and come alongside them as they heal. I pray that my grandchildren and future generations would be able to grow up being treated with respect and acceptance in their Native land.*

### **CB (posted June 13, 2008)**

*My mother was taken from her family at age 7, and dropped off on her reserve at age 16 years. She asked for directions to her family home, and as she made her way through the woods on a path, she met a woman. She asked this woman if she was heading in the right direction to her mother's house. Little did she know that she was talking to her own mother. I cried when I first heard that story from my Mom when I was in my 20's.*

*She had not seen her mother in all those years. Her most imbedded memory of her childhood is of 'always' feeling hungry; she said all of the children became very excited when twice a year the 'inspectors' would come. That is when they were fed big hearty meals with real butter and milk. As well she recalls being punished for speaking her native language, and if the Sisters thought they were not working hard enough with their chores, they were called heathen savages.*

*The stories go on and on.....I never understood why my mother could never show affection, and never said she loved us, her children. Her problems with alcohol, depression and anger I now know were fueled by her lonely, regimented, and cold-hearted, childhood experiences.*

*It is unfathomable to think of all that our culture has lost due to all that was taken from our families who endured the residential schools. So many ongoing problems, and always put-downs and disrespect by many non-aboriginals who have no understanding of the depth of our losses.*

*I honor my Mother and all of her siblings, who also endured the residential schools-my uncles with the biggest 'hearts' and the kindest smiles but saddest of eyes, who ruined themselves with alcohol.*

*It is a similar story with almost all aboriginal families. And I ask for strength for all; to rise above the vices that have been used to hide or mask the deep pain so that our people can again be proud and have dignity.*