

**Reaching for the Beaded Flower:
Reflections from the Waters of an Indigenous Studies Experience**

Indigenous Peoples of Canada: Part 1 (INDG 1220_D02)

Instructor: Dr. Laura E. Forsythe

Student Number: 6501244

June 2, 2024

In this essay, arranged across two themes embedded in a metaphor, I intend to look back upon certain episodes within an Indigenous studies course which have captured my attention, made fresh demands on personally held preconceptions and misconceptions about the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples, and created tensions within me that have led to epiphanies of confrontation. It has been through exposure – for the first time – to the academic literature of Indigenous scholars which has produced this new attention, made new demands on thinking critically about our collective past, and caused the oftentimes emotional and tensile reactions to that literature. Metaphorically, I am as a little child standing at the edge of a great sea before me, an ocean of unknown Indigenous truths, and am tempted to reach out to grasp the flowers which float there. Each flower is a truth to be told, a beaded one carefully made by the grandmothers, the scent alluring and calling for truths to be told; with story. Guided by what has emerged from this metaphor, what has glinted at me from the surface of these waters, the two themes addressed

in this essay are these: 1) Origins – the ecology of pre-contact migration, and; 2) Linguicide and its outcome – cultural femicide.

Origins:

With respect to the pre-contact, geographical origins of Indigenous Peoples and the populating of Turtle Island, the ‘terrestrial model’, which argues that hunter-gatherer peoples utilized the ‘Beringia land bridge’ to cross exclusively by land, was the sole theory presented in the educational and scientific circles of which I am familiar. There was no mention of alternatives, and certainly no mention of the possibility of a continuously inhabited Turtle Island stretching back in time not easily measured. In a collaboration among archeologists and marine ecologists, Erlandson et al. (2007) discussed an alternative hypothesis regarding the incursion of modern human populations from eastern Asia to the Americas. Their “Kelp Highway Hypothesis”, which implied an ecologically based coastal migration theory of origins, presented to me a striking alternative perspective while casting doubt upon the exclusivity and widespread acceptance of the ‘Beringia land bridge’ model.

The affect – and effects – of this were immediate. What affected me upon this revelation from the *scientific* literature was recognizing the absence of this viable alternative in any discussions about Indigenous origins that I have been involved in nor the literature with which I was expected to engage with. The work that I do in my vocation insists upon a reliance of possessing credible evidence and to be open to new discoveries and novel ways of interpreting the available evidence. In this instance, it was as though other hypotheses were kept hidden from my vantage point, the available evidence discounted, and that the colonialist narrative of a very recent incursion into Turtle Island by Indigenous peoples had fed very well into a model which inclines towards such peoples as being lesser. To deny extremely ancient origins of Indigenous

peoples by simply being dismissive of new evidence, or to not confront the traditional unitary view of natural history, denies any possibility of accepting true indigeneity *in situ*; that is, it excludes *a priori* any discussion that Indigenous Peoples have always populated this land. Steeves (2015) addressed such culturally and archeologically deficient attempts at understanding theories of Indigenous origins, positioning the Bering Strait Theory as an illustration of Western scientific bias which disfavours any models of human incursions into the Americas in the absence of an ice-free corridor. Moreover, Steeves (2015) argued that without consideration of alternative models, it creates “minimization in time and place of Indigenous people[s] in the Western Hemisphere...[and] acceptance of times of great antiquity” for human populations elsewhere (p. 61). The impact of this piece will be lasting, both personally and professionally. Personally, because this is now a ‘flower’ in that ocean of truth alluded to earlier that I can reach out to by continuing my own exploration into archeological, ecological, and genetic evidence for the origins of Indigenous peoples in the Americas; and do so with a balanced, equitable purview. Professionally, I can bring these new perspectives to forthcoming collegial conversations which – until now – have emphasized a restrictive view on origins models. Such conversations lead to encouraging new research paradigms which can then foster new avenues of scholarship which, in turn, offers the hope (the Nêhiyaw *nêhiyawêwin*) of deeper understandings of the sense of *place*.

Linguicide and its Outcome: Cultural Femicide

In my earlier years living in a Manitoba First Nations community, I recall vividly the occasion when an elder – a woman (*kokum*) of advanced age - enunciated among the people, “our children must not lose their language, because that is how they will get rid of us. Without our language, our culture dies.” Recently, in a conversation over tea, a family member of mine (through marriage) declared, “You are not gonna like this, but the languages, the ceremonies, the

ways of life of the Native (sic) must *die* so that they can move forward...” A heated exchange resulted. I was deeply affronted and hurt. I felt my positionality was worthless. If any dream of a ‘reconciliation’ is defined by the re-establishment of an amicable relationship now lost, such a dream seemed to vanish in that moment. Today, I am reminded of two things of significance from the clarion call given that day by the *kokum* for the preservation of language: 1) the inextricable and inalienable connections between language and culture, and; 2) the importance of the preservation, vitality and active continuance of Indigenous languages not only among those for whom it is a birthright, but also among non-Indigenous peoples who can potentially be transformed through becoming Indigenous language *learners*. For me, language is not merely a natural expression of culture – it *is* culture.

Notably occidental scholarly linguicidal traditions of privileging the written word over Indigenous traditions of oracy and artistic representations has had implications for how history is portrayed – or not portrayed – by academics and cultural historians using their respective historiographic lenses. For example, in the examination of Haudenosaunee culture by Stevens (2013), certain oral-written tensions surfaced which he described as occupying “the contours of the pre-contact past” along which path one must be “aware from the outset that [we] are entering still-contested territory...[into] the problematically chronicled past...[and] its interpretation” (p. 149). Stevens’s ‘contours’, integrated as waves into our metaphor of the ‘ocean of Indigenous truths’, would include many vibrant and differentiated ‘flowers of language’ which speak to the authenticity and power of language as shaping the indigeneity of the landscape of the past, the present, and the future.

If one accepts the thesis that the origins of language, and the deposit of language among the knowledge-keepers, is uniquely if not exclusively embodied in womanhood, then the coerced loss of language through legislation, cultural biases, diaspora-causing migration, and paternalistic hegemony among Indigenous peoples (the ‘linguicide’) becomes irretrievably linked to the loss of feminine cultural voices (as ‘femicide’). In this regard, the work of Lawrence (2003) has illustrated for me the complex relationships which have contributed to this cultural femicide by the sexist provisions originating in the Indian Act of 1876 and its implications. In her view, “colonial incursions into Native spaces generate almost unimaginable levels of violence” for women, inclusive of the loss of status, being forced to leave the community, the loss of status of descendants, and the permanent isolation and alienation from culture (Lawrence, 2003, p. 9). In the metaphor of this essay, every Indigenous woman who has been stripped of identity, or place, or status, or the ability to speak is one of the beaded flowers plucked from the ‘ocean of truths’ and ruthlessly cast aside.

In his *Challenging a Racial Fiction*, Innes (2021) pointedly submits that “the Métis, Plains Cree, Saulteaux, and Assiniboine people[s] were closely related” within the context of kinship (p. 94). I viewed this as both an example and recognition that kinship did not denote sameness, nor a common language, nor common customs, but a sharing relationship which honoured and respected these characteristics. At the heart of this shared relationship, for me today, is honouring linguistic identity through preservation and sitting at the feet of the women who are principally responsible for the continuance of Indigenous languages. I see a crucial path for me on this journey, and that is to make a commitment – every five years or so – to learning the foundations of an Indigenous language outside of what I presently know (Nêhiyaw) and treating these opportunities as a personal contribution to Reconciliation through the continuing

education of the self. In his remarks about what lies at the core of Reconciliation efforts, Senator Murray Sinclair pointed in this direction of language and cultural loss, and the potential for healing through a completely new way of educating toward a restoration of balance in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2019). I see this restoration of balance as proceeding from among many opportunities, including: “Learn to speak, and keep talking.”

References

- Erlandson, J. M., Graham, M. H., Bourque, B. J., Corbett, D., Estes, J. A., & Steneck, R. S. (2007). The Kelp Highway Hypothesis: Marine Ecology, the Coastal Migration Theory, and the Peopling of the Americas. *The Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology*, 2(2), 161-174.
- Innes, R. A. (2021). Challenging a Racist Fiction: A Closer Look at Métis-First Nations' Relations. In J. Adese, & C. Andersen (Eds.), *A People and a Nation: New Directions in Contemporary Métis Studies* (pp. 92-114). UBC Press.
- Lawrence, B. (2003). Gender, race, and the regulation of Native identity in Canada and the United States: An overview. *Hypatia*, 18(2), 3-31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3811009>
- Steeves, P. F. (2015). Decolonizing the past and present of the western hemisphere (the Americas). *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archeological Congress*, 11, 42-69.

Stevens, S. M. (2013). The Historiography of New France and the Legacy of Iroquois Internationalism. *Comparative American Studies an International Journal*, 11(2), 148-165.
<https://doi.org/10.1179/1477570013Z.000000000037>

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Mini Documentary - Senator Murray Sinclair on Reconciliation. (2019, Feb 7). National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjx2zDvyzsU&t=43s> [Accessed May 27, 2024]