

Mennonite and Métis: Adjacent Histories, Adjacent Truths?

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Everywhere, in all times and places, human beings have appropriated one another's cultures, lands and religious practices. It may be argued that these are always colonizing acts, but there is in any case a great variety in kinds of appropriation, ranging from appreciative imitation to violent imposition and all manner of syncretisms in between. Our focus in this paper concerns the inter-religious and cross-cultural exchanges between indigenous peoples and settler cultures in what has come to be called "North America." In much of the cultural appropriation literature, at issue are specific acts of appropriation of religious symbols and ceremonies, such as sacred sweats, pipe rituals, sun dance, vision quest, by non-natives – whether deep ecologists and "new agers" or those with more commercial interests. The issue here is the public representation of these religious practices when they are detached from their traditional contexts. This is especially problematic when those traditions have themselves been obliterated or diminished by law and government policies, and the peoples of those traditions stripped of their own practices and ceremonies – as is the case for first nations.

This suggests that the larger ethical issue is the cultural context in which appropriation as destructive domination has stripped indigenous

peoples of their heritage and identity, including the religious ceremonies and practices that have nurtured and sustained them. This is not only a question of whether or not to allow such ceremonies and practices, and under what conditions, but entails the larger issue of sovereignty—the rulings about property, rights of land ownership and access that assume a modern European statist model of political and legal authority. That model already violates traditional indigenous understandings rooted in completely different cosmologies and religious visions of the human relation to the land and to particular places. Religious ceremonies and practices are not just “data” or “artifacts” or aesthetic-emotional rituals. They are also religious duties by which the land, the creation given as gift from sacred powers, is made holy and offered back by humans whose task it is to do so. These ceremonies are the sacred exchange of gifts and responsibilities that relate more broadly to a culture, a coherent way of life in the land. Vine Deloria puts it this way:

Removing an Indian tribe from its aboriginal territory, therefore, results in the destruction of ceremonial life and much of the cultural structure which has made ceremony and ritual significant... Although the loss of the land must be seen as a political and economic disaster of the first magnitude, the real exile of the tribes occurred with the destruction of ceremonial life... People became disoriented with respect to the world in which they lived.¹

The life of the people now comes to be defined not ceremonially and dramatically but technologically and litigiously in continuous adjustment to technological innovation, articulated in the legal terminology of a materialist commodity political economy and individual, contractual rights. At this point we ought to catch a glimpse of the enormity of the problem, one that threatens to call into question from the outset a basic assumption of this research project, namely, that there are ethics experts who reside in modern industrial research universities who can sort all this out.

In other words, if we are to take up the question of the ethics of cultural appropriation with honesty we will need to be willing to call into question the privileged status of normative ethical concepts and theories that define a) culture, cultural engagement, respect, etc.; b) property, representation, appropriation; c) religion, the sacred (and the secular), etc.; d) rational, rationality, publicly acceptable reason. Indeed the very notion that ethics may be abstracted from religion and from experiential, contextual dwelling in the land and its lived narratives, is already a radical contradiction of traditional

indigenous knowledges and practices—and not only of first nations but also of the indigenous knowledges and practices of the biblical tradition that has shaped the ethical forms of habitation of particular countercultural peoples (such as Mennonites) even in contemporary western, “European” contexts. The very idea of ethics as a discourse of normative control and technical conceptual expertise is problematic, tied performatively to a commodified culture informed by Hobbesian models of political sovereignty and legal authority (with their own rootedness in religious and political traditions of a distinctive kind).

We are convinced, however, that ethics should not be seen as a matter of problem-solving or finding the correct theoretical or policy framework. We believe it is important to begin more gropingly in stories and in the difficult, vulnerable journey towards respect rooted in attending personally to divided worlds of experience. What we offer in this essay is such a path, the halting narrative beginnings of such a journey.

Part I: “Mennonite” (Travis Kroeker)

I was born in Steinbach, the main town of the “eastern reserve” of the Manitoba Mennonite settlement, three generations removed from the Manitoba Act of 1870 that fostered group colonization of the prairies. My ancestors arrived from Imperial Russia in 1874, a few short years after Treaty #1 (1871) had extinguished Indian land titles and “opened up” the region for agricultural settlement. Having been born on a “reserve” perhaps it is not so odd that my first language was the Mennonite Low German and that when we moved to cosmopolitan Winnipeg when I turned five, beginning English kindergarten that autumn, I experienced culture shock – a shock from which I have never fully recovered. The shock was to my “identity,” my sense of self, as I experienced myself as an alien, an “other” with a strange, unwritten language and an odd cultural-religious formation. This wound to the spirit continued as I grew older to raise painful questions about negotiating cultural and religious differences – as of course I also discovered that I no longer truly belonged in my former world either. Such wounds are an opportunity as well and, indeed, this essay is but another step in what I expect will be a life-long journey toward healing.

At the age of three or four, as I recall, colourful strangers arrived on my grandparents’ farmstead (where I too lived with my parents) with wares to sell. I say colourful because I had never seen people dressed in such bright shirts, large shiny belt buckles and cowboy boots. My grandfather conversed with them in his broken English, a conversation I’m sure I did not understand. Afterward I was told

these were “Indiauna” – though I expect they were really Métis, who neither lived on their own reserve nor on Métis homesteads but rather, as Carole Leclair memorably put it to me, on the road allowance. I do not know whether or not my grandfather bought any of what they were selling nor do I remember being told anything about the significance or historic importance of these intriguing strangers. I’m sure my parents and grandparents had never themselves been taught or thought much about it. They would not have known that in the 1870 Manitoba census, fully one half the population was French speaking Métis, another one third English speaking Métis; and that while the various treaties provided land reserves and colonial payments for various Aboriginal groups, the Métis land question was never resolved. Of course, neither my grandparents nor these aboriginal visitors would have considered this ignorance an issue – they lived separate lives and for the most part I’m sure preferred it that way. My “little church” (*Kleine Gemeinde*) Mennonite ancestors were not proselytizers and indeed many of them fled Manitoba for Central America in the mid-twentieth century, in partial response to the government’s “reinterpretation” of the historic agreement allowing Mennonites to self-school their children, thus enforcing Mennonite acculturation to a dominant Canadian society.

When I moved to Winnipeg as a child we attended a small inner-city Mennonite church made up of recent emigrants from Mennonite reserves to the multi-cultural city – part of the rural-urban migration that accelerated Mennonite acculturation to the Canadian mainstream. Here again I encountered the indigenous peoples, though now largely in terms of the demeaning caricature of the “drunk Indian.” Unlike the many upwardly mobile Mennonites seeking and finding prosperity in their new setting “off the reserve,” it seemed clear that many indigenous peoples were living out the despair of a subjugated and defeated culture. Clearly, as white Europeans, Mennonites “fit in” and indigenous peoples did not. I knew then even as I (more consciously) know now that there is something deeply troubling about this from both ends. That is, to me it was and is no less disturbing that acculturating Mennonites fit in so well, despising their own traditional ancestors and their aboriginal neighbours – easily internalizing the grotesque caricatures and prejudices of the wider dominant culture – than it was and is distressing to see the visible oppression and despair in indigenous cultures. I knew in my bones (though I did not necessarily welcome this knowledge) that to be true to my own peoples’ spiritual narrative would require me not to “fit in” but to remain deliberately marginal and alien to such marginalizing and alienating cultural patterns of colonizing oppression. This is not a stance of private, individual purity or neutral detachment, but one of engaged resistance to a cultural conformity of diminishment.

“Breaking out” of my Mennonite subculture in order to explore such disturbing questions meant for me attending a centrally dominant Canadian institution of acculturation, the University – about which our traditional elders had been deeply suspicious (“*je jeleada, je vetjeada*”; “The more learned, the more perverted”). There, interestingly on the recommendation of a Mennonite professor (one of the “*vetjeada*” no doubt), I read a book that deeply affected me – *Black Elk Speaks*, the autobiography (1932) of an Oglala Lakota holy man (1863-1950) as mediated through the literary telling of a white poet of the Great Plains, John Niehardt.² This text may be interpreted as a parable of the ethics of cultural appropriation, in all of its perilous possibility. It is itself a literary record of an indigenous religious life lived in transition from the traditional ways to the colonizing arrival of the Wasichus on the Great Plains. While mediated in the language and literary form of a Wasichu poet, it nevertheless also preserves an indigenous account of the meaning of life experienced in the wake of this colonizing encounter, structured according to the sacred cosmology of the Lakota peoples.³

This book showed me two crucial things about dialogue in the face of difference and, indeed, a history of damaging colonization and appropriation: self-criticism (or, less academically, penitential lamentation) and generosity. *Black Elk* bears powerful witness to the conquest of the land by European Christendom colonizers. As such, it is a bitter truth also for Mennonites, themselves historical victims of European Christendom – persecuted for their difference in the practices of adult (not infant) baptism, a free (not state) church, and nonviolence in imitation of Jesus – that they too became willing and highly successful participants in this colonizing mission. And yet, in *Black Elk*’s account, there is also a generosity toward the “other” that does not remain within exclusivist conventional categories of any kind – whether that of victim and oppressor or aboriginal and Wasichu or Lakota and Christian. There is a dramatic openness of engagement and permeable identity displayed in *Black Elk*’s story that allows for vulnerable exchange across cultures, that points to a path beyond ideologies (and ideology-critiques) and power politics (whether statist, tribal, ecclesial or academic), where movements toward healing may occur.

This healing path speaks to me of a willing dispossession of security – whether of moral self-justification or academic methodologies of various kinds or religious or political self-righteousness. This path is one of opening one’s heart to pain, the pain of diminishment, the pain of one’s own complicity in the diminishment of other peoples and cultures, and the pain of the great ignorance, complacency and despair such diminishment produces in all who are involved. This pain, like all

pain, is a gift that opens us to what is broken, damaged, and in need of repair. So also are guilt, anxiety and regret – all forms of penitential lamentation for the failure to acknowledge, accept and dwell with this pain—to be treated as gifts. Such gifts are intrinsic to the movement of spiritual and cultural freedom away from damaging and diminishing forms of prideful possession.

When I first met Carole Leclair I came armed with an academic essay draft that self-consciously displayed its unconventional and narrative approach to the ethics of religion and cultural appropriation. Carole likened it to a high-powered, finely tuned intellectual machine clicking on all cylinders (and, though she didn't say it, I imagine with all the windows closed and the stereo turned up to comfortable music). Despite its self-avowed vulnerability, Carole audaciously and generously showed me that it offered little room for her or for a truly open human exchange on what is at stake in this question. She opened me up to new dimensions of engagement that begins in a more personal and groping attention to the stories that make up our different perspectives and experience. This personal attention entails for her a willingness to be reconnected to the history of the land that we share (not a meeting on more abstract intellectual, academic terrain) so as not to forget the possibility in generosity of a new kind of critical, mutual and engaging dwelling in this suffering land.

What I come to see through Carole's tenacious "no bullshit" engagement is that ethics in this matter is neither a matter of constructing frameworks or paradigms (whether of the theoretical or the policy kind) nor problem-solving. It is in the first instance a willingness to sit and walk together in the uncomfortable "between" of a cultural divide where we neither see very clearly where the exchanges will take us nor are able to detach or abstract ourselves from the painful narratives and challenges we there encounter. Our first task is a disciplined, open attention. The academy, like the wider dominant culture, has not fostered such vulnerable attention very well. We have often instead developed mechanisms of control, cultivated exclusive and exclusionary disciplinary specialisms, and an approach to knowledge as "information processing," "data analysis," and methodological sophistication. By such paths wisdom will not allow herself to be seen or approached; such paths produce only terminal creeds/beliefs/ideologies that violate reality through enforced conformity.

For myself, I have found a glimmering of the possibility of another path – not colonizing or controlling but penitential and open to otherness – in my own biblically formed tradition. It is well expressed in the words of the secular Jewish culture critic Walter Benjamin, deeply critical of European state sovereignty: "like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a

power to which the past has a claim and that claim cannot be settled cheaply.”⁴ Settling cheaply is not primarily an economic matter, but a spiritual one – where is the spirit in our culture? Benjamin is very wary of a widespread progressivism in modern western culture which assumes that everything belongs to it, is simply standing reserved for its own appropriation. Such is our techno-globalist age that piles up cultural conquests and appropriations like so many trinkets in a multi-cultural boutique. Benjamin believes that our only possible redemption from such violent colonial politics lies in a remembering again that we did not make the world, nor therefore do we measure it. Such practices of remembering will open us critically and generously to different notions of “tradition”: oral and not only literary; ritual and not primarily monumental (ritual is alive and lived whereas monuments terminally memorialize the captured dead); cosmological and not only sociological; liturgical and not primarily litigious; existential and not only creedal.

Only such spiritually disciplined cultural practices by people in their own particular times and places will enable resistance to the tremendous pressures to conform to the global progressivism that requires the oblivion of many forms of life and knowledge crucial for the flourishing of human dwelling in the land. Such lives lived on the margins are not a retreat from cultural engagement. For example, while Carole and I have each expressed serious criticisms of the academy and its practices, neither of us (so far as I know) is about to resign our university positions. But we each in our own way are calling for a more open and vulnerable way of being in the academy by accepting marginality and a greater range of cultural-linguistic expression and experience through the willing dispossession of security and dominance. This enlivening of both self-criticism and generosity will entail a movement from intellectual control to relinquishment, from dominion to more vulnerable dwelling, from possession to the exchange of (often painful) gifts, from fear toward love. In my own Mennonite tradition of messianic love patterned after Jesus, this marginality is expressed first of all in the dispossession of tradition as “one’s own,” since life is not “one’s own.” Paul the apostle expresses it as a messianic calling to live “*hos me*” (“as if not”):

I mean the time has become contracted; in what remains let those who mourn live as if not (*hos me*) mourning, and those who rejoice as if not (*hos me*) rejoicing, and those who buy as if not (*hos me*) possessing, and those who use the world as if not (*hos me*) fully using it. For the outward form of the world is passing away. (I Corinthians 7:29f.)

There is a particular kind of “making use” of the world that treats it in a non-proprietary manner, not tied to juridical ownership. It takes its ethical bearings from the non-possessive biblical vision of a creation in which human creatures dwell in the world vulnerably in a manner that opens it up to being made new by the ever-new agency of the sovereign Creator. Such an ethic can never claim sovereignty for its own cultural or religious identity. The living “as if not” possessing one’s cultural or religious identity is not abandoning it for an “elsewhere” but dwelling within it as in exile, in dispossession, in all of its embodied particularity. This transforms it in keeping with its true condition, its “passing away” toward an “end” that lies beyond it and remains unknown, open. Such a messianic identity is not a new universalism that somehow transcends or escapes difference. Indeed it is not to be related to a form of universal “knowing” of any sort. Paul says, “anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by God” (I Cor. 8:2-3).

This reversal suggests a relinquishment of human sovereignty and subverts a colonizing mindset. An “as if not” messianic ethic does not possess an ideal that makes humans the universalizing masters of their own moral and political destinies. It is rooted in a self-emptying movement of dispossession that cannot become yet another act of controlling legislation in the name of a merely human sovereignty. The “as if not” relinquishes its moral striving and its hold – whether of the technological means of progressive liberation from the decay and bondage of nature or the political means of liberating particular identities from the burdens of their oppressive traditions and conditions. The point is rather to open all worldly callings and conditions to the transfiguring passage of love. And in love it is necessary to get beyond possessive identities and aspirations altogether via the gift of a healing rooted in penitence – for Mennonites a penitence for participating in the destructive domination and appropriation of peoples and lands. Such healing will also require Mennonites to wrestle self-critically with the messianic paradigm in a suffering love that chooses to pass through and not merely leave behind or “replace” the groaning weight of past cycles of victimization, violence and retribution. There is no path to salvation and shalom except through self-losing service to what passes away.

What could this mean for the question of appropriation? Perhaps it is easier to say what it would *not* mean. It would not mean bringing the Bible and taking the land but rather, in the first instance, a relinquishment of clinging to control in cultural exchange. It would not require the subordination of another culture to my own, nor the desire to possess that culture or even to preserve my own. It would not construct an ethic of universal principles or of universalizing

procedures, nor a theory of universal political sovereignty, but would begin more humbly by honouring particular agreements made with particular indigenous peoples, allowing the pain of cultural wounds to open us to new, particular paths of dwelling together in our differences in this suffering land.

Part II: “Métis” (Carole Leclair)

I will tell you something about stories, [he said]
 They aren't just entertainment.
 Don't be fooled.
 They are all we have, you see,
 all we have to fight off illness and death.
 You don't have anything If you don't have the stories.

Ceremony - Leslie Marmon Silko⁵

Following a series of emails, Travis Kroeker and I agreed to meet at a local donut shop to discuss a possible collaborative essay. I admit it; I was skittish. I had almost made up my mind to refuse this task. I was wary of the assumption held by many that academic pursuit of indigenous religious and cultural knowledge is inherently positive. The outpouring of published texts on indigenous literary and spiritual life, by Native and non-Native writers, confuses issues of appropriation. What knowledge ought to be kept sacred? What knowledge can be commercialized and how do the communities who create this knowledge benefit from this process? Indigenous cultures have deep ties to storytelling, but the stories we tell bear little resemblance to the dominant cultural concepts of the literary Indian, the noble savage, the dying races.

Historian Winona Wheeler notes that western-based academics place a high value on procuring “knowledge” or the “truth” as a goal in and of itself,” whereas in indigenous thought, “you can’t just go and take it, or even go and ask for it. Access to knowledge requires long-term commitment, apprenticeship and payment.”⁶ It is never enough simply to learn the facts of indigenous spirituality; the seeker must first learn how to respect its practices, its ways of living. The Department of Religious Studies at my university refused me permission to teach Native spirituality there because I am not an academic specialist in that discipline. Some doors remain closed. In my university there is a glimmer of discussion about the importance of space and place for indigenous knowledge, witnessed by the fact that our fledgling Indigenous Studies Program exists.

Travis and I reflected on how and why we should have a conversation, a Métis professor of Indigenous Studies and a professor of Religious Studies. The answers began to unfold for me when I learned that Travis, a Mennonite, was born near my Métis village of Vassar, Manitoba. Just look at this co-incidence. Travis and I were born in the same neighborhood, in villages less than fifty kilometres apart. Both of us became academics in Ontario, but otherwise our worlds seemed not to intersect at all. I wanted to take a closer look at the idea of divided worlds, not with a view to finding comfortable parallels in our experience, (a perspective which flirts with appropriation), but to find a way to come to easier terms with our differences. The land itself connected us. I trust the land as my mother and my teacher. And so, tobacco in hand, Travis came to visit and our conversations began. As we walked together on his bush property I could see that he felt a caring connection to the trees, the plants and animals that live in that place. The connection Travis feels for the land is not the same as mine. Our cosmologies originate in difference. But as we walked the narrow trails, I began to relax and smile with him. What forces are at work to keep our worlds separate? Can “dialogue” accomplish change? I’ll come back to these questions.

I am a Red River Métis, a descendant of many generations of *Saulteaux*, Dakota, *Montagnais* and French peoples who traveled this land and who sometimes made their homes in those precarious little villages like St. Vital, St. Boniface and Vassar. My grandfather Joachim was one of a number of Métis who emigrated from Red River, south and eastward, creating settlements along the way, places like Marchand, Thibaultville and Woodridge. Marcel Giraud describes my family when he writes:

Beyond the immediate bonds of the Red River, the situation is noticeably worse. [...] there survives a society without any breadth. A considerable proportion of its members lack any possibility of adapting to the methods or the mentality of the whites. Many families who were incapable of becoming incorporated into the economy of the Red River and of retaining their lands retreated here to seek, in this primitive environment which so abruptly succeeds the agricultural zone of the colony, a way of life in keeping with their past.⁷

The term Métis usually refers to a particular group, primarily the French descendants of the fur trade era, those who developed their own ethnicity and language in western Canada. Today the term is used throughout Canada and increasingly in the United States to identify any mixed-Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal person. It is this practice of using the

term Métis in a generic sense that Saskatchewan Métis leader Clem Chartier argues against.

While Indian Nations and the Inuit have been here for a very long time, the Métis are a young nation. We have grown from the Indian Nations, particularly the Cree and Ojibway. Initially we were of “mixed blood” but since those beginnings, we have evolved and developed into a specific nation of our own. It’s not correct, and we object, when people say the Métis are mixed-blood people.⁸

Métis, like First Nations people, are not one homogenous group. Our cultural and linguistic differences divide us as surely as geographic distance. For me, even more important than these cultural distinctions are the things we concern ourselves with as Aboriginal peoples – such as, the land, the turn of the seasons, the telling of how we came to be and what will be our shared fate as living beings on this earth. I recall Laguna writer Leslie Marmon Silko’s words, “You don’t have anything/ If you don’t have the stories.”

Feasting is a fine old Métis tradition. Eating together speaks to the communal, to trust, to the circle completed when all the food is eaten, the songs sung, the stories told. When I teach a course, my students host at least one social. I cart my plug-in fry pan, flour and blueberries to many meetings. Once we held a bannock-making contest in the university corridors. Several hungry scholars peeked out of their tiny offices, sniffing the air, searching out the source of the delicious and seditious aromas.

Hot bannock, fried slices of bologna, and a cup of tea. And, of course, blueberry jam for bannock dunking. After a while we are smiling with blue teeth, black mouths, and sparkling eyes, laughing at each other.⁹

I tell you this story because this is how we inhabit the space of the university, precariously, with difficulty. We invade with our smells of baking bannock, with our talk and our too loud laughter. We set up a kitchen table in the very heart of the academy to acknowledge that the institution of academic research is alienating; it perpetuates colonizing structures. The process of encapsulation of indigenous peoples began with the fur companies’ attempts at total economic control, with government’s legal and political control, and the Church’s replacing indigenous theologies with Christianity. Our talking does not yet gain us recognition, respect or credentials in universities. The academy holds power to designate what is useful knowledge and to engage thoughtful

people in critical discussions. Flux and adaptation is woven into our indigenous cultures and it would be a mistake to see our use of skidoos and televisions, cell phones and academic posts as evidence of total conformity to the dominant society.

My Grandmother remembered how it all began, the life of our little village. She told of arriving as a child from somewhere near Argyle Minnesota to the place which would become Vassar, a place she described as “that desolate place, all poor, with only a few log cabins.” She recalled the men cutting the logs, dragging them by oxen to a portable saw mill and making nice big wide boards of Norway and jack pine. Last summer my mother, sister and I went back to Vassar, possibly for the last time. We stood in the graveyard which cradles our ancestors; we walked around the crumbling foundations of grandmother’s house, which now sits on land owned by strangers. Wonderfully strange, we found the old railway station house had been moved onto this land and there it sits, out of place. The Mennonite community refused this railway as a danger to their way of life. For many Métis, it was a way out of poverty and exclusion. The railway also brought nuns, and harsh assimilation, and loss of the Michif language, a loss that my mother still grieves.

I admit that I began my conversation with Travis with an attitude of suspicion and resentment, an attitude which I considered historically justified. I felt a familiar fear of being hurt, being humiliated. I charged him with the 1870s migration of Russian Mennonites to America, of bargaining with the Dominion for the best free Métis land settlements on the prairies, and of having initiated the great grab of Indian land in the Oklahoma Territory! He responded with words like repentance and regret. I didn’t care for this response. Too Christian, I thought, and unlikely to address the grinding poverty in indigenous communities, poverty linked directly to unresolved land claims. What I was hoping for was a co-operative reflection, as allies, on solutions we might imagine when confronted by the displacement and disempowerment of Native peoples. There is a fine balance between setting out the boundaries of a discussion and being accusatory. Occasionally I lose my balance.

My Grandparents were born into turbulent times. They were part of a generation of Métis whose lives and communities were deeply affected by the economic juggernaut of capitalism and the aftermath of the failed uprisings of 1885. All his life, Grandfather was terrified of “la police” and in awe of priests. For many generations, Métis rebellion and loss in my family hardened to produce what Métis writer Gerald Vizenor calls “terminal creeds” and “terminal believers.” Kim Blaeser offers Vizenor’s definition in these terms:

In "I know What You Mean" he defines "terminal believers as "those believing in only one vision of the world." (96) "Terminal creeds," claims a character in *Bearheart*, "are terminal diseases." (85) Whether sacred or secular, tribal or nontribal, terminal creeds destroy."¹⁰

Misogyny, threats of Christian hell-fire and concern for his family name motivated my grandfather to make virtual prisoners of his six daughters. Marriage was the only permanent way through the front gate. My mother, the most stubbornly resistant, most rebellious of his daughters, fled to Winnipeg, and later to Ontario, after giving birth to two Métis daughters, "à la façon du pays,"¹¹ long after that fashion had faded from history. Grandfather, a "terminal believer," refused to see us. We did not travel back to Vassar until he died. I search for traditional dreams and visions in order to re-fashion my grandfather's fate, that of being trapped within any terminal creed which ultimately isolates and destroys love. As an adult, my mother chose the path of resistance to Christianity. She chose the "red road," learning what she could of the spirituality of her *Saulteaux* and *Assiniboine* heritages. She gave these teachings to us, and she gave us a persistent desire for freedom.

So, am I free today? Let me tell you another story. Recently I went to visit a lawyer in order to draw up a trust fund. Just before the meeting, I checked out his website and discovered that he was launching a class action suit on behalf of the townsfolk of *Caledonia*, a town where *Six Nations* peoples are attempting to reclaim lost lands. I asked him about the language he chose to describe the situation, words like "angry native protesters" and "terrorists." He responded with fixed, banal, clichéd justifications and lack of historical knowledge, ideas I hear repeatedly from those who live in a world apart from indigenous peoples. I left the meeting feeling angry and cynical. To me this meant a closing down of spirit, the abandonment of kindness. Mutual accusations begin with conflict, over land, and belief and sovereignty. The managers of such conflicts (government, police, church and tribal leaders) dictate the language, the slogans and stories that are most easily digested. In a recent speech to Latin American and Caribbean bishops at the end of a visit to Brazil, the Pope said the Church had not imposed itself on the indigenous peoples of the Americas. They had welcomed the arrival of European priests at the time of the conquest as they were "silently longing" for Christianity, he said.¹² Without intellectual vigilance, we can become trapped within the crude generalizations and superstitions, the "terminal creeds" we use to imagine others' truths. We accuse each other, both within our indigenous communities and across the common Canadian culture. Political and ideological forces work to keep our worlds separate.

My conversations with Travis take a different turn. True, there is a small sadness, a certain lack of understanding, the difficulty of cross-cultural communication, but there is also a widening space of mutual respect. This is an important part of what our talks produced. With increasing trust, we can speak of our memories, our beliefs and religious histories, without being forced by shallow rhetoric to choose the victim or aggressor roles. We can acknowledge one another's just claims without relinquishing any part of our unique identities. It was Travis who reminded me (several times) that our knowledge of each other's heritage and personal viewpoints is always partial, interested and potentially oppressive. Our mutual histories on this land dictate this fact. The "old ones," the grandmothers, brought me to the academy to work for them. I am to play a small part in "getting the story right – telling the story well,"¹³ a research model rooted in our indigenous ways of thinking, being and knowing. For this reason, I insisted that Travis set aside his discipline-based approach to research and tell me some of his small stories, maps across generations, maps of devastation and also of hope.

Dialogue alone cannot create the kind of changes needed if first peoples are to prosper again in this land. Aboriginal "days of action" bring strident voices and political defensiveness to the podium, rather than real change. Talking with Travis will not change the heart-wrenching statistics of teenage suicide in our indigenous communities. Have our conversations been simply an academic exercise? I will allow Travis to answer this for himself. For me, personal healing has been an important point of our encounters, not surrendering politics, or ignoring the weight of history. These healing talks work against estrangement and indifference. As an aboriginal scholar/activist, my first responsibility is to my own people. My work is for them. My heart is for them. But our elders tell us repeatedly that kindness is the simplest and most difficult teaching we have. It brings peace, and confidence and the courage to tell our stories without rancor or bitterness. In all our words together, Travis displayed this kindly spirit. Still I say, "not enough."

At the heart of the appropriative impulse is what literary critic Arnold Davidson¹⁴ describes as a "double temptation." Canadians often display a fascination with Aboriginal worldviews and the outward symbols of our various beliefs, while determined to hold on to their own cultural securities. Elders describe this tension as "walking with a shoe and a moccasin," of being off-balance. In an attempt to resolve this desire/refusal, some of us (academics in particular) are tempted to retreat to an imagined neutral corner, covering our escape in blankets of critical inquiry and intellectual reserve. Our stories, our historical narratives, are not objective and unbiased. They are constructed out

of personal and ideological interests, as are all human narratives. Events in our histories have caused our cultures to become “split at the root,”¹⁵ which produces a multiplicity of voices, both traditional and contemporary.

The truth is, there is no neutral clearing in the thickets of current Aboriginal political and theoretical play, no safe place for academics, activists or political leaders to position themselves with respect to competing truths. In this land now called Canada, aboriginal peoples are not safe, nor are their sovereignty issues respected. To acknowledge this and to work for change does not require us to abandon cherished convictions if these include such values as social justice, empathy and the refusal of a convenient historical amnesia with respect to first peoples.

Notes

- ¹ Vine Deloria, Jr., *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America*, ed. James Treat (NY: Routledge, 1999), 244-45.
- ² *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, as told through John G. Niehardt (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961).
- ³ Vine Deloria therefore suggests, as an articulation of the existential, liturgical and theopolitical substance of the Lakota tradition, it has become (for better and for worse) something like a “bible of tribes,” a pan-Indian vision for all kinds of first nations peoples. Vine Deloria Jr., *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America*, ed. James Treat (NY: Routledge, 1999), chapter 23.
- ⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 254
- ⁵ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 2.
- ⁶ Winona Wheeler, “‘every word is a bundle’: Cree Intellectual Traditions and History,” unpublished paper, 1998 quoted in Andrea Smith’s *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2005), 133.
- ⁷ Marcel Giraud, *The Métis in the Canadian West*, 2 vols., trans., George Woodcock (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 1986), 480-81.
- ⁸ Clem Chartier, “Metis Perspectives on Self-Government,” in Richard James Goss, James Youngblood Henderson and Roger Carter, eds., *Continuing Poundmaker and Riel’s Quest: Presentations made at a conference on Aboriginal Peoples and Justice* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing and the College of Law, University of Saskatchewan, 1994).
- ⁹ Ruby Slipperjack, “Blueberry Days,” in *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, eds., Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1.
- ¹⁰ Kimberly M. Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 49.
- ¹¹ A fur-trade term for liaisons with native women outside church sanctioned marriage
- ¹² http://www.nowpublic.com/aboriginals_in_brazil_deeply_offended_by_pope_benedicts_recent_statements_on_immaculate_genocide
- ¹³ Linda T. Smith, “Getting the Story Right – Telling the Story Well: Indigenous Activism – Indigenous Research,” in *Pacific Genes & Life Patents*, eds. Aroha

Te Pateake Mead and Steven Ratuva (University of the South Pacific, Fiji: Call of the Earth Llamado de la Tierra and the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies, 2007), 74-81.

¹⁴ Arnold E. Davidson, *Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 22.

¹⁵ Nancy J. Peterson, "Haunted America," in *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 30.