

Breathing Life into the Territorial Acknowledgement

Melanie Janzen¹
University of Manitoba, Canada

We are all severely damaged goods: on the one hand, Canadians are damaged by their history of plunder, the constant rationalization of their preponderant super-sized entitlement over space, and their control of time; on the other hand, Indigenous people are damaged by the absence of entitlement, so damaged that sorting this out will be a nightmare. But do it we must. (Maracle, 2015, p. 126)

It was one of those enchanting mornings; the illuminated cerulean prairie sky, the mud-bottomed ribbon of the Red River silently slipping along without a ripple, and the air already warm, clear, and full of promise for a hot summer day. I was cruising the river trail on my bike, heading towards the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) where I was co-teaching a summer course. As I followed the trail along the scrubby bank, the path gently veered to the left and entered a clearing where my view was captured by the immense museum building in the distance. The glass tower of hope, issuing from the museum and piercing the unclouded sky, was illuminated by the sun, while the grassy riverbank lay before me at my feet. I stopped to take a photo, thinking I could add it to my slides before class began.

I work on a university campus surrounded on three sides by the snaking Red River. The campus is situated on Treaty One Territory, original lands of the Anishinabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Dene Peoples and Homeland of the Métis nation. According to Aimée Craft (2013), Indigenous lawyer and scholar (Anishinabe-Métis), Treaty One is significant in the history of relations between the Canadian government and Indigenous peoples, as it was the first of the numbered treaties and was “the hinge on which western agricultural expansion, and the national railway, were resting” (p. 39). Historically significant given the shared colonial history of this place, Treaty One remains important as Canadians work to understand this country’s colonial history, as well as the present-day colonial structures and their implications.

Our campus, like many institutions across Canada, has developed a territorial acknowledgement that is intended to pay respect to the land and the original peoples of the land, the treaties, the damaging effects of colonization, and our collective responsibility in an era of truth and reconciliation. However, this is not without problems. How, as a settler, researcher and teacher, do I offer a territorial acknowledgment that is meaningful, when I am so clearly situated on—and benefit from—stolen land?

Traditional Territorial Acknowledgement

The University of Manitoba campuses are located on original lands of Anishinabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. We respect the Treaties that were made on these territories, we acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, and we dedicate ourselves to move



TO CITE THIS ARTICLE PLEASE INCLUDE ALL OF THE FOLLOWING DETAILS:

Janzen, Melanie (2019). Breathing life into the territorial acknowledgment. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 16 (2) p. 74-81 <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/tci/index> <access date>

forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration. (University of Manitoba, Traditional Territorial Acknowledgement)

Many Elders and Indigenous colleagues advise that in order to make a territorial acknowledgement meaningful, the one providing the acknowledgement should create a personal link to the acknowledgement. In other words, the one giving the acknowledgement should consider what the acknowledgement means to them personally. As a white settler who grew up near the Red River in this city, I feel as though I have historic, geographic and social connections to this place. The photo I took that morning seemed like a pleasant image reflecting the river and the city and my personal connections growing up here. However, when I looked at the photo again, I was surprised to see the ways the camera had captured some of the complex layers of this city's colonial past and present. The photo provided me with a text that was richer than I had first imagined—but, as I will explore, could only bring me so far.

Figure 1. Photograph for Territorial Acknowledgement



My (Insufficient and Incomplete) Territorial Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge that we are on Treaty One Territory, home of the Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples and homeland to the Métis nation. I use the photograph that you see projected here to visually represent our shared colonial history and the complexities of the relationships of those who reside here. I like to use this photograph to remind myself of my place on Treaty One Territory and the work that is required of me as a settler of this place.

You can see how in this two-dimensional photo, the image appears layered into horizontal striations. In the layer second from the bottom, we see the muddy river (for which the Cree word is “Winnipeg”; “Win” meaning muddy and “Nippee” for water.) The river slices across the page, flowing from The Forks where Indigenous peoples have been gathering for millennia. The river represents the robust trade and travel systems of the First Peoples and the vigorous fur trade facilitated, in part, by The Voyageur. In the layer directly above the river, we see the rusty bridge of the rail line like a razor cutting across the image and through the land of this country, and representing the arrival, spread, and physical colonization of this place. In the layer above that and dominating the eye, we see the Canadian Museum of Human Rights and its now-famous imagery of the glass tower of hope spouting from its immense tyndal stone base. The museum was and is a contentious project, built on the banks of The Forks (an Indigenous sacred site) and directly on top of the greatest archeological find of Indigenous artefacts in Canada. Aiming to be a beacon for our city and nation, the museum simultaneously acts as a lightning rod to both controversy and thoughtful critique. Finally, in the foreground (at the bottom of the photo) and easily overlooked, we see a non-descript riverbank, grassy and flat, with the decrepit Alexander dock on its edge...

In Winnipeg, it is enough to say that this is the Alexander Dock—everyone here knows the recent history and horror of that site. However, if I was welcoming people to this place who do not know the significance of these docks, I might also remind them that: *The Alexander Dock is a significant landmark in our city, as this is the place where 15-year old Tina Fontaine’s body, wrapped in a garbage bag, was pulled from the river. Finding her tiny body ignited outrage in our city and it spread across the country, ultimately sparking the initiation of the Missing and Murdered Women and Girls Inquiry....*

But I don’t usually say that—people who live here know this.

Describing the photo as part of my territorial acknowledgement felt more meaningful and I was satisfied with it—for a time. In creating this territorial acknowledgment, using the image and its layers of visual and historic text along with the commentary, I thought it was an attempt to “breathe life into what are essentially relationship documents” (Craft, 2013, p. 12). Craft explains that the treaties were agreements that were greater than the actual treaty document and that they are premised on relationships: “relationships between and among ourselves, relationships with other animate beings” (p. 16). The image provided context and a personal connection to the



place, but ... who was in relation here? And, with whom?

Territorial Acknowledgements: “Pretty but Empty Words”

Recently (and perhaps for much longer), Indigenous peoples, academics, and community leaders have been questioning the value of land and territorial acknowledgements altogether. For example, Audrey Siegl of the Musqueam stated that territorial acknowledgements are “just tokenism, pretty but empty words, spoken so we will be pacified for at least a little bit longer” (as cited in Hergesheimer, 2016). Similarly, Indigenous professor, Laara Fitznor, who generally supports the intention of land acknowledgements, cautions that we need to be remind ourselves that these acknowledgments are “just words” (as cited in Brass, 2018). This made me wonder, what and whose narratives are being upheld in these acknowledgements?

I am reminded of Dwayne Donald’s (2012) metaphor of the fort and how this became a symbol that reified the divide between Indigenous and settler peoples. I think it could be argued that territorial acknowledgements act in similar ways; as examples of a colonial frontier logic (Donald, 2012) that works to maintain divides between settlers and Indigenous peoples. In other words, are they becoming another example of an institutionalized practice that assumes and maintains the “assumption that the experiences and perspectives of aboriginal peoples in Canada are their own separate cultural preoccupations” (p. 92)? As Laara Fitznor points out, although she appreciates that the university has a land acknowledgment, it does not reflect her perspective as a Cree person and Indigenous faculty member. Fitznor said, “When I read it, I said ‘This is not me’ because they’re saying ‘I’m sorry’ to you, and I’m reading it — do I say ‘I’m sorry’ to myself?” (as quoted in Brass, 2018). It seems that the acknowledgement reiterates settler colonial logics, reinforcing colonial dominance as “a kind of cultural ditch—separating Aboriginal from Canadian” (Donald, 2012, p. 93). Is it possible for treaty acknowledgements to be more than just empty words, moves of colonial logics? Donald (2012) suggests that one must “contest the colonial frontier logics by instead emphasizing the relationality and connectivity that comes from living together in a particular place for a long time” (p. 93).

Back to the Beginning

Sometimes to go forward, we need to go to the beginning
(Maracle, 2015, p. 120).

After the signing of Treaty One in 1871, the Canadian government began to facilitate settlement of the prairies by offering large parcels of land to Europeans. In the late 1800s, Mennonites from southern Russia arrived in the ‘newly created’ province of Manitoba. My great grandparents—both maternal and fraternal—arrived in Canada as immigrants seeking refuge from persecution due to their religious beliefs as conscientious objectors. According to Manitoba government documents, the government sought to “entice” these “industrious farmers” to the prairies by providing them with exemptions from military service, religious freedom, and land for settlement (Ledohowski, 2003). Thus, the Mennonites received reserves or “large tracts of land for their exclusive settlement,” and subsequently developed the “East Reserve” (1874) and the “West Reserve” (1875) on respective sides of the Red River (Klassen, 2018). Enlisting colonial discourses of *terra nullius*, and reinforced by narratives of the making of Canada, the land was considered uninhabited and free for the taking. This “logic of elimination” (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013) is an event of settler colonialism “in which the colonizer comes to stay, making himself the sovereign, and the arbiter of citizenship, civility, and



knowing” (p. 73). The reserve land granted to the Mennonites allowed for the establishment of 87 Mennonite villages and accompanying farmland for which they paid nothing, and which is now some of the most productive and lucrative farmland on the prairies.

It is no coincidence that the government’s promises of land for European immigrants coincided with the development of Residential Schools, which actively removed children from their homes and land, and coincided as well as with the Indian Act (1876), which was put in place to control Indigenous peoples and their movement. Generally speaking, Canadians are beginning to understand that these colonial stories of discovery and nation-making were narratives established and perpetuated by the colonizing state in an effort to control and colonize the land and its first peoples. However, these were not the stories we were told growing up, nor do we—at least in our family history—articulate these in regards to our personal implication. The stories we were told reinforced heroic settler narratives of Canada. For example, as conscientious objectors, Mennonites were forced to flee their homeland for fear of persecution and upon arrival in Canada, carved out a life through their hard labour and innovations of farming. The sod house, temporary structures built before materials were secured for more permanent dwellings, makes an interesting metaphor for the prairie settlers, for industriousness, perseverance in extremely difficult conditions, but also for illustrating how embedded in the land these immigrants were—literally burrowing themselves into the landscape to survive the winter. These narratives were reinforced in family stories, school curriculum, and multicultural ideologies that painted Canada as a great frontier, bravely settled and improved through industriousness and hard work. Extolling Mennonite values of pacifism and heroic tales of immigration, our family’s history was legitimated a “creation story” used to “conceal the teleology of violence and domination that characterize settlement” (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013, p. 74).

In the Mennonite creation story of righteousness and brave struggle, stories of the First Peoples of this land were absent. I cannot recall a single family story that involved my family’s relations with Indigenous people. It was as if these people—whose land we occupied—simply did not exist. It is this logic of elimination that seeks not only to dominate a group of people, but is primarily motivated by the acquisition of land (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013). Importantly, in this historic and contemporary move, in which the “violence of invasion is not contained to first contact or the unfortunate birthpangs of a new nation, but is reasserted each day of occupation” (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013, p. 73), the Mennonites are still there and farms have often been passed down through generations.

In seeking information about what has been eliminated in our family’s creation story, I found a news story posted online by CBC about the exploitation of Indigenous peoples who were recruited by Mennonite farmers to harvest the sugar beets in the 1940s to 1980s. The farmers would enlist Indigenous people from the reserves, promising pay and accommodations. What the labourers received instead, it was reported, was grueling work, minimal pay, and no food or even water. When I shared this story with my mother who was born and raised in the Mennonite reserve lands, she mused aloud, “I wonder what other little secrets exist.” She proceeded to tell me of memories of her grandmother giving bread to the ‘Indians’ who showed up on their doorstep begging for food. It would have been important to Mennonites to uphold savior narratives, reified by constructing Indigenous peoples ‘as less than or not-quite civilized’ and in doing so allowed the colonizers to feel—and reassert—dominance by ‘helping’ the ‘poor.’ Such creation stories “cover the tracks” of the settler colonizer masking the violence of domination and erasure (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013).



My mother was wise to these and other hypocrisies that emerged throughout her upbringing, leaving her community the day she completed her final grade 12 exam. She could not reconcile the teachings of the faith with the ways in which she saw life being played out for people around her. For example, her father, who had enlisted in World War II as a means to provide for his family, was actively shunned by the community upon his return, refused employment and access to the church because of his violation of their religion's pacifist beliefs. Risking his life to put food on the table was not a forgivable offense.

Donald (2012) explains that “imagining decolonizing Aboriginal-Canadian relations begins with carefully tracing the colonial nature of those relations—in the past and today—and acknowledging that colonial frontier logics continues to have a tremendous influence on how the relationship is conceptualized” (p. 93). Unearthing stories that reveal the relationships between the Mennonite settlers and the Indigenous peoples helps to reveal underlying power structures, inequities, racism, and failures of ethical relationality. Yet, these stories are scarce. My mother's question, “I wonder what other little secrets exist,” indicates the efforts made by settler communities to hide their inconvenient and unethical truths and the dominant narratives at play in hiding these secrets. Yet, it is through ongoing efforts to reveal the dirty little secrets that a “shared condition wherein colonizers and colonized come to know each other” (Donald, 2012, p. 93) can be fostered.

My great grandparents and grandparents were quite poor; they never did own any farmland—they did, however, benefit from the work that settlement on the land allowed. Eventually, my parents moved individually from their Mennonite communities in southern Manitoba to Winnipeg, seeking work and, perhaps, also freedom from the religious communities that they often found oppressive. After marrying and renting in the north end of the city, my parents purchased a small house near the Red River, on Treaty One Territory—although they would not have known that. Treaties were not acknowledged in the 70s. The mortgage was an immense financial burden. Yet, my parents managed to carve out a working-class life for our family due to their industriousness and hard work, as well as their white privilege. Although my Dad had dropped out of school at grade nine to work, he was trained and employed in a unionized trade. As a family, we benefited greatly from his job, which provided a good salary and benefits. It meant my sister and I could go to university—the first of our dozens of cousins to be able to do so.

Like most settler Canadian children of that time, my sister and I were schooled in rosy narratives of the history of Canada reflecting ideals of multiculturalism. ‘Natives’ were portrayed in our books as historical figures benefiting from colonization. We ‘acknowledged’ this history by making sugar cube igloos and reading a poem by Pauline Johnson—ignoring entirely the First Nations and Métis peoples of the past and of the present on whose land this education was occurring. Except for the story of Louis Riel—who back then was still considered a traitor and deserved the punishment of being hanged. These minor curricular events (in that they took up hardly any time or space) are stark illustrations of the ways in which curriculum was—and is—a hegemonic structure. Our curriculum reflected (and still reflects) “idealized and mythologized” (Donald, 2012, p. 95) versions of history, which “morph into hegemonic expressions of existing value structures and worldviews of the dominant group in society” (Donald, 2012, p. 95). The curriculum circulated stories of courageous settlers of Manitoba—from Mennonites to Icelanders—all pioneers of the frontier and makers of this nation, erasing any real existence and influence of Indigenous peoples in the past and ignoring their continued existence in the present.



Lowering the Fire

...the fire is lowered, until the next time we meet. We have not finished our work. Our work is never done. Things change, we change. We will discuss this again. (Elder Elmer Courchene, in Craft, 2013, p. 113)

I have attempted to consider my family's presence and complicity in the shared colonial past of this country, seeking to reconsider the Mennonite myths of victimhood and heroism, and narratives of settlement and survival, in order to recognize the multiple truths that exist in our creation—and more importantly, the stories that were absent. This helps to illuminate both the gifts we were given and the debt that we owe. This is an exercise that “seeks to understand more deeply how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other”, unearthing our “relationality and connectivity that comes from living in a particular place for a long time” (Donald, 2012, p. 103). Yet, it is unfinished and remains inadequate.

Of course, this reflection risks critique of navel-gazing, of re-circulating the settler narrative, and of re-centering whiteness and my own privilege. And so, as Lee Maracle (2015) reminds us in this paper's opening quote, sorting this out risks being a nightmare, “but do it we must” (p. 126). At best, this effort might be seen as an attempt to unveil the dirty little secrets of our past in order to inform a more truthful creation story. Hopefully, it may be seen as a provocation of a conversation about our shared colonial past and how it operates in the present; a consideration of what a territorial acknowledgment might mean—to me, to my family, to all of us in relation on this place, then, now and in the future.

As I continue on this journey of truth and reconciliation (and not unproblematically), my Territorial Acknowledgement continues to evolve. Currently, it ends with: *What I appreciate about this photo—and why I share it with you—is that it visually represents a shared colonial history and our complex present of residing on this place. It reminds me, as I ride past on my bike, of my privilege as a descendent of the Mennonite settlers who were given land, of the debt that I owe, and of the responsibility that I have to live here in a good way, together in relation with others, and in particular with those to whom this land belongs.*

Notes

¹ Melanie.Janzen@umanitoba.ca

References

- Brass, T. (2018, October 11). Speaker raises issue with Traditional Territories Acknowledgement in Lecture. <http://www.themanitoban.com/2018/10/indigenous-prof-critical-of-u-of-m-land-acknowledgement/35407/>
- Carreiro, D. (2017, June 18). “You had no choice”: Indigenous Manitobans shed light on exploitative farm labour program that ran for decades. CBC Manitoba. Retrieval from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/indigenous-forced-labour-sugar-beet-farms-1.4165272>
- Craft, A. (2013). *Breathing life into the stone fort treaty: An Anishinabe understanding of Treaty One*. Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing.



-
- Donald, D. (2012). Forts, colonial frontier logics, and Aboriginal-Canadian relations: Imagining decolonizing educational philosophies in Canadian contexts. . In A. A. Abdi (Ed.), *Decolonizing Philosophies of Education* (pp. 91-111). Rotterdam: SensePublishers.
- Hergesheimer, J. (2016, March 18). Unceded territory: Meaningfully acknowledging Coast Salish peoples. Retrieved from: http://www.megaphonemagazine.com/unceded_territory
- Klassen, J. (2018, August 9). *Mennonites, Métis and First Nations*. Steinbach Village News Blog. Retrieved from: <https://www.mysteinbach.ca/blogs/9111/mennonites-metis-and-first-nations-people/>
- Ledohowski, E. (2003). The heritage landscape of the crow wing study region of southeastern Manitoba. Manitoba: Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism. Retrieved from: https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/hrb/internal_reports/crow_wing_study.html
- Maracle, L. (2015). *Memory serves: Oratories* (S. Kamboureli, Ed.). Edmonton: AB.: NeWest Press.
- Tuck, E., & Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A. (2013). Curriculum, replacement, and settler futurity. *JCT (Online)*, 29(1), 72.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2014). Unbecoming claims: Pedagogies of refusal in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(6), 811-818.
- University of Manitoba. *Traditional Territorial Acknowledgement*. Retrieved from: http://umanitoba.ca/admin/indigenous_connect/5728.html

Submitted: November, 20th, 2019.

Approved: December, 03rd, 2019.

