

Voice and Speech Trainers Association Conference
Orlando, Florida
August 6, 2019

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we gather is the traditional territory of the Seminole and Miccosukee First Nations; land upon which I am a guest, actively working against colonialism.

I hoped, in the process of crafting this land acknowledgment, to consult with local Indigenous Peoples. I phoned the Seminole Tribe of Florida Headquarters to consult about how best to structure this land acknowledgment.

The US Department of Arts and Culture states that “acknowledgment is a simple, powerful way of showing respect, and is a step toward correcting the stories and practices that erase Indigenous people’s history and culture, and toward inviting and honouring the truth. Acknowledgement is a critical public intervention; a necessary step toward honouring Native communities and enacting the much larger projects of decolonization and reconciliation. Acknowledgment by itself is a small gesture. It becomes meaningful when coupled with authentic relationship and informed action. But this beginning can be an opening to greater public consciousness of Native sovereignty and cultural rights; and a possible step toward reconciliation.”

Information about how you can learn more about incorporating land acknowledgement into the work you do in the United States can be found at the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture webpage (usdac.us) or on social media #honornativeland, and for those of us in Canada, more information is available at www.native-land.ca

Chelsea Vowel, a Metis writer and lawyer, says on her website (www.apihtawikosisan.com) in a blog entry entitled Beyond Territorial Acknowledgments posted on September 23, 2016;

“If we think of territorial acknowledgments as sites of potential disruption, they can be transformative acts that to some extent undo Indigenous erasure. I believe this is true as long as these acknowledgments discomfit both those speaking and hearing the words. The fact of Indigenous presence should force non-Indigenous peoples to confront their own place on these lands.”

I wish to acknowledge the many Elders and Knowledge Keepers that have been so generous with me, in sharing their wisdom, their stories, and their time. They include Elder Dan Thomas, Elder (& Dr.) Ruth Christie, Elder Margaret Osborn, Dr. Ellen Cook, Jeffrey Booth and Andrea McCluskey of the Aboriginal Student Services Centre, and Elder (& Dr.) Dave Courchene of Turtle Lodge; whose words at the Spring Convocation earlier this year continue to inspire me.

I would also like to thank my many supportive colleagues at the University of Winnipeg who shared their knowledge, time and energy with me throughout the duration of this project, including Wab Kinew, Kevin Lamoureux, Dr. Annette Trimbee, Dr. Lorena Fontaine, Angeline Nelson and everyone at Wii Chiiwaakanak Learning Centre who supported this project with space, administration, and care for Cameron Adams as he engaged in the field work portion of our project. Wii Chiiwaakanak provided invaluable support for the community connections that were made in our urban, local community in

Winnipeg. I would also like to thank Jennifer Cleary, Research Officer at the University of Winnipeg, for her expertise, kindness, and generosity of spirit throughout this project.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank our wonderful Research Assistants over the last three years. They include Elan Marchinko, who skillfully transcribed the 4 focus group forums into transcripts for analysis; Brefny Caribou-Curtin, who supported this project with excellent foundational research on Indigenous languages in Canada; Nishina Loft who, continued the foundational research, including many samples of Indigenous accents, language and culture gleaned from YouTube— especially those resources in Ojibwe (Anishinaabemowin) and Mohawk (Kanien'kéha), Katie German; who carefully and skillfully engaged in the Qualitative Analysis of the transcripts; and finally, Cameron Adams, who engaged in field work and used his wonderful interpersonal gifts to engage with community members who were interested in sharing their voices with this project to serve Indigenous storytelling on stage and in film for the Indigenous Performing Arts community in Canada.

Finally, we wish to thank the forum participants that generously participated in the 4 forum conversations held in Winnipeg, Toronto, and online. Your perspectives shaped the direction of this project and the work we engaged in. It is our sincere hope that the resources that are now owned by Native Earth Performing Arts Centre in Toronto will help to support storytelling (on stage and in film) that promotes empathy and action; and that these resources will help to further positive change in our society, through your artistry.

Ceremony

Ceremony prepares everyone to work together in a good way with clear heads and open hearts.

I've been fortunate to attend ceremonies and events at the University of Winnipeg that have had lasting positive impacts and helped me to learn in new ways. University of Winnipeg has identified Indigenization as a Strategic Direction and actively incorporates knowledge and culture into content and governance. University of Winnipeg is the first University in Canada to have an Indigenous Course Requirement for all undergraduate degrees.

In her Masters in Social Work thesis, Sheila A. Nyman shares a quote from Joyce Underwood, a founding member of the Elders' Voices program at the University of Victoria. The quote is from 2014, the year before she passed. Joyce spoke about ceremony in this way:

"When you stop and do ceremony you literally clear your mind, your heart and your spirit, the answers come freely to you"

I love this quote and I am grateful that I can relate to the experience she speaks to. We do not have an elder or knowledge keeper here with us today; (I wish we did!); and so we are unable to begin this event with ceremony. What we can do is to consider these words, while we set out to share knowledge with each other today.

My anecdotal and subjective definition of research is the creation of new knowledge. It is my hope that new knowledge will be created in this space, collaboratively, that can serve those in attendance, as well as the communities that we collectively serve in approaching Coaching Indigenous Accents with great care, respect and humility.

Auto-ethnography, Storytelling, and Seven Teachings

I engage with an autoethnographic approach to the knowledge mobilization of this research project—storytelling—about my lived experience; an approach that is common in Indigenous scholarship. This is consistent with Indigenous pedagogical approaches in which stories are teachings, and the storyteller has a responsibility to ‘give away’ the knowledge; to share what they have learned.

Storytellers share their own life experiences with humility as a way of provoking critical reflection in others, while continuing to learn themselves. Decolonizing stories, told in this manner, are an interactive exchange between teller and listener, in which both learn and teach.

In *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*, Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett identify the work auto-ethnographers do:

Auto-ethnographers build on recent reconsiderations of the uses and meanings of personal narratives to examine the ways in which selves and social forms are culturally constituted through biographical genres

Auto-ethnographers reject the search for universal and objective “truths” in favour of the personal and the subjective.

Auto-ethnographers address the emotional and personal experiences that characterize and shape fieldwork.

What makes these works distinct from an autobiography or a life history is the narrator’s attempt to turn the ethnographic gaze on his or her own life and work. In this respect, auto-ethnographers are at once narrator and analyst.

I do not desire to center myself in the work, nor do I wish to do so in this space. Jan Hare, Associate Dean for Indigenous Education at UBC highlights that “Decolonization requires centering, or re-centering, Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing in how we plan, deliver and assess our work (and I add...as educators, coaches and voice trainers).

Critically investigating my own experience within the project may be the best way to help suggest Best Practices to other trainers who wish to engage in coaching Indigenous accents & texts for performance. Roger Epp, in *We Are All Treaty People: History, Reconciliation and the ‘Settler Problem’ in Dilemmas of Reconciliation: Cases and Concepts* (2003) suggests that for settlers, “making (ourselves) the subject under closest scrutiny” becomes essential as part of the decolonization project.

Paulette Regan, former Director of Research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, has an invaluable book; *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*. This text, to me, feels like the Canadian companion piece to the work being done by Robin DiAngelo here in the United States.

In the book, Paulette Regan reveals:

“...my own deepest learning has always come when I was in unfamiliar territory culturally, intellectually, and emotionally. It seems to me that this space of not knowing has power that may hold a key to decolonization for settlers. Back then, I was just beginning to appreciate the richness of the gift I had

received from residential school survivors. Sometimes, we are offered a gift that we are reluctant to accept. Perhaps we do not recognize it as a gift because it feels like a burden, like a heavy responsibility that we don't quite know how to carry, and we are afraid that we will do so poorly. I now realize that their gift is a life teaching that I will always carry with me and continue to learn from in new, unsettling ways."

Throughout this project, I have grappled with, and self-critiqued my own decolonizing struggles. Situating myself and my own identity in this research has been an unexpected and necessary aspect of the project; something I did not predict, and an aspect I am grateful for. Am I a colonizer? What does it mean to be a Euro-Canadian settler? I work for social justice and positive change in my spheres of influence, I support students, colleagues, and artists wholeheartedly, I am a feminist, I was raised by a single mother; an Italian immigrant, in a working-class family. I was not raised in middle-class privilege; far from it. Am I part of the history of colonization in Canada? Am I part of ongoing colonial systems? Which systems do I benefit from, today, that are colonial in nature? Does my behaviour disrupt or reinforce colonialism on a day to day basis? What needs to be changed in my behaviour and thinking to support decolonization in my everyday interactions? How can I decolonize my professional practices? My pedagogical approaches? My coaching practices? How will these changes positively impact the work I engage in, and possibly the community and society I live and work in? If patriarchal systems impact both women and men in adverse ways, how do colonial systems similarly negatively impact us all, and how can we work to disrupt and free ourselves and others from these systems of oppression?

These questions, and many others, often left me feeling stuck; fearful at making mistakes when initiating connection with others and moving the project forward.

Paulette Regan suggests that "we must risk interacting differently with Indigenous people – with vulnerability, humility, and a willingness to stay in the decolonizing struggle of our own discomfort." This has been what I've tried to do, to the best of my ability, and I am grateful for those generous folks who were willing to engage with me throughout this process as well.

I am also grateful to Tanisha Taitt, whose presentation Contemporary & In Colour: Culturally Integrated Scene Study for Today & Tomorrow at the Got Your Back Conference at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto in May, 2019, spoke to the fear dominant-culture educator/artists may consider around appropriation and making mistakes. She suggested that dominant culture educator/artists should "embrace discomfort" and that we can "ask and consult" and reach out to others for guidance, suggesting that "there are always people who want to help". I am grateful that there are generous collaborators in our communities who are open to sharing perspective and knowledge to support our shared goals of positive social change through artistry.

My experience in this project is situated within The Seven Teachings (The Grandfather Teachings) as a framework. The Seven Teachings overview is on display in a curated art installation at Fort Whyte Alive in Winnipeg. Consultation on this project was provided by Alan Sutherland (White Spotted Horse), Skownan First Nation, Manitoba, Canada. Animal names were provided by Allen Sutherland (Saulteaux), Steve Cowley (Cree) and Wandbi Wakita (Dakota). Artwork affiliated with each teaching was prepared by grade 5 & 6 students from Wellington School, Winnipeg, Manitoba, under guidance of teachers Ms. Cathy Woods and Mr. Jon Paintin.

For those that are unfamiliar with these teachings, here is a succinct overview.

(Images of the curated art installation are shown)

The Seven Teachings, also called the Grandfather teachings, come from the Anishinaabe Midewiwin tradition. The Anishnaabe believe that to follow these teachings with oneself, with each other, and with the Earth is to live in a good way. The behaviour of certain animals are associated with each of the Seven Teachings.

Love (Eagle). Eagles mate for life and raise their young with love. Sometimes this means 'tough love' as the parents must prepare to let go of their young as they leap and fly out of the nest.

Humility (Wolf). Wolf shows humility by living not for oneself, but for the pack. All pack members have the responsibility to help each other as a family and community.

Bravery (Bear). A mother bear has limitless courage and strength to fight when her young are in danger, and will face up to challenges despite her fear.

Honesty (Sabe). Sabe (sasquatch) is the four-legged who walks on two legs and is very tall. He stands tall as he is true to himself and others, and so those that are truly honest are said to 'walk tall'.

Wisdom (Beaver). Beaver uses the gift of wisdom to engineer dams and create new habitat. But if a beaver does not use their teeth, they will grow too long to use.

Truth (Turtle). Turtle moves slowly, understanding that the key to finding truth is in living life's journey.

Respect (Buffalo). Buffalo shows deep respect for hunters by giving its body to feed many people.

Paulette Regan advocates for reconnecting reason and emotion—head and heart—as integral, vs a mind/body split which places a higher value on fact-finding and efficiency over emotional expression and relational issues, which, from a Western perspective, may seem superfluous.

Mohawk scholar-activist Taiaiake Alfred says that the Indigenous method of learning is really one of transformation, and it is experiential, observational and practical. As voice and speech trainers, we are keenly aware of embodied and experiential learning that may be supported and accessed through emotions, body, spiritual presence and imagination. There is overlap in these existing methodological frameworks.

Intercultural Collaboration

In the final months of the project, Cameron Adams and I engaged in what might be described as an intercultural collaboration. Throughout this process, I was continually interrogating my own position within the collaboration; the possible problematic power dynamics of instructor/student, supervisor/assistant and settler-colonizer/Indigenous person being considered in each interaction, on a near-daily basis.

In *Rethinking Collaboration*, Alison Jones offers "To rethink collaboration between indigene and colonizer is both to desire it and to ask troubling questions about it...Interrogating the logic of (my own) White/settler enthusiasm for dialogic collaboration, I consider how this might be an unwitting imperialist demand—and thereby in danger of strengthening the very impulses it seeks to combat. I do

not argue for a rejection of collaboration. Rather I unpack its difficulties to suggest a less dialogical and more uneasy, unsettled relationship, based on learning (about difference) from the Other, rather than learning about the Other”.

This speaks to my own self-reflective concerns as we engaged in the field work & supervision portion of the project.

Cameron has generously shared his perspective in a recorded video which he sent to me this morning. Originally we had hoped to have him skype into this presentation, but he is unable to do so today. Cameron is an award-winning student at the University of Winnipeg who is well known in our community. He is the current co-president of the Indigenous Students Association, the Young Humanitarian of the Year Award recipient (paired with Senator Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Committee, as the recipient of the Humanitarian of the Year award), and is working to revitalize the Swampy Cree Language through his innovative mobile language app, which is set to launch in September. In addition to these many accomplishments, Cameron is also active with Habitat for Humanity, having traveled earlier this year to Macedonia. It was my privilege to get to know Cameron through Elder Dan Thomas.

(Video recording from Cameron Adams <https://youtu.be/ID3QwgtNJWY>)

As Cameron mentioned, many concerns were raised throughout the field work portion of this project. At times we were confronted with the possibility that we were exploiting marginalized urban Indigenous people by offering what some considered to be a high rate of pay for an honorarium (\$25).

Others felt that this honorarium was disrespectful as a compensation for the years of embodied knowledge that one might carry with them (with decades of life experience, wisdom, and understanding of the language and the cultural context of that language). One elder expressed concern to Cameron that the recording of Indigenous accents is the appropriation of 70+ years of knowledge, represented by speech, which could then be used and trained in a very minimal amount of time comparatively speaking. This elder spoke about how the accent represents more than just the accent; he speaks a language and has a knowledge that the actor will never have. His concern was that this representation can allow someone who has no knowledge or who has never been to a place to appropriate that knowledge on a surface level.

Concerns such as these, and my own self-critical reflections were unpacked each day; sometimes in (long) conversation with Cameron, with Eric, and sometimes in reflection on my own. At times when I considered if the project should move forward, I turned back to the data and the qualitative analysis. We had consulted with performing artists who had identified a need for supportive materials and had requested us to continue with the project. In reminding myself that I am an artist, and that I seek to serve artists with this project, I was encouraged to continue on with the project's trajectory.

In reflecting on which aspects of what I've learned throughout engaging on this project might be most useful for those in attendance today, I believe that it comes full circle, from the start of the project right through to its culmination; relationships. And the use of the circle image is not lost on me, and its significance reverberates through my reflection on this project.

Relationships, built through time, repeated interactions, and trust building, are the cornerstone of coaching Indigenous accents.

Relationships offer the foundation for this work to be possible. For settlers, (re)educating oneself in an awareness and knowledge of a country's colonial history with its Indigenous peoples is necessary to support building these relationships in one's community.

Demonstrating respect, listening, attending local events, and placing relationships before outcomes have all been ways I have sought to nurture these connections in my community. These relationships are just beginning, and I look forward to their development and growth over time. My hope is that you will seek out similar opportunities in your own communities to make these connections.