

"Treaty People, Covenant Relationships"

Sharing from the North American Institute of Indigenous Theological Studies
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JULIA:

June 7 – 9th, Joe, Michaela, Michelle, and myself had the privilege of attending the annual NAIITS Symposium in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Many, if not most, of you, have probably never heard of NAIITS before – I hadn't until this year. [NAIITS \(formerly North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies\)](#) is part of a non-sectarian organization called Indigenous Pathways. It is dedicated to working together with the Indigenous community to develop and articulate Indigenous perspectives in theology and practice. They offer 5 degree programs partnerships offering undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate programs. They have campuses in Canada and the US, and I believe one now in Melbourne, Australia. For the sake of keeping to our allotted 20 – 25 minutes, I encourage everyone to check out the NAIITS website for more in depth information into the program.

I had never been to an actual adult conference or symposium before, and I had no idea what to expect. Given the theme of the symposium, "White Supremacy, Racial Conflict, and Indigeneity: Towards Right Relationships", I anticipated some heavy content and was intrigued to hear the discussions sounding the topic. I certainly was not disappointed! But what I did not anticipate was feeling extremely unsettled and conflicted the entire symposium.

My ancestors were European settlers, as I'm assuming most of the congregations are, given majority of our parents/grandparents/great-grandparents migrated over from Russia, Ukraine, Germany, etc. I've grown up my whole life believing that I am "from Canada" because I was born here; my parents and grandparents were born in Canada, and I'm a third generation born Canadian citizen. I've never believed otherwise or thought to consider myself a settler, which perhaps is a reflection on my ignorance. And I'm certainly not alone in this, as we were never taught in schools about Treaties or any sort of Indigenous history of those who were here before European settlers arrived. In fact, only recently are they starting to incorporate Indigenous history and teach about the varying cultural practises in schools. The first class I ever took pertaining to First Nation's history was in university because they just weren't taught in elementary school or high school at the time. Even then, we weren't told that we were not "from" Canada. So on the second day, during a talking circle, when the group leader, Casey Church, invited us to refrain from saying we are "from ____" because technically we, meaning us and our ancestors, are not FROM that North American place of residence – I admit to feeling surprised and a bit defensive. I feel like most people would agree that majority of Canadians of European descent operate under the notion that we are from Canada.

This was a new idea to me and my first thought was, “I was born here, I’ve never known anything else, how can they possibly suggest that I’m not actually from here”.

The conference was 4 months ago, but I still find myself struggling with this concept and thinking of it often. Perhaps this struggle comes from a fear of not belonging. “If I’m not from the place where I was born, where do I belong?”. I certainly don’t feel as though I belong to the Ukraine or Germany or Holland or wherever else my folks came from – I’ve never even been there, so why would I make a point to even introduce myself as Julia, a descendent of a European settler from Ukraine? But whoever I am distantly related to who came and participated in the colonization of this land had no right to take the land and call it their own, which is what they did. I then realize if I feel unsettled, confused, defensive, and conflicted about not actually being “from” a land that was taken, I can’t imagine the frustration and the feeling of not belonging those Indigenous to this land feel and would have felt, and continue to feel to this day, as European colonizers have taken what was and is theirs.

Ultimately, the symposium really drove home the fact that those of us who are not Indigenous to this land do not own it and it’s important that we acknowledge this as a way of working toward a right relationship.

MICHAELA:

I felt many things during my time at the NAIITS symposium. It’s hard for me to put it into one word. It was a bit of an emotional journey for me. I moved through feelings of defensiveness, humility, inspiration, sadness, and restoration.

When it comes to my identity as a white, Christian woman, I felt a deep sense of shame. Christianity has not always been used for good work in our world. In fact, it has often been used as a weapon for discrimination against those who present an obstacle to white-settler sovereignty and economic domination. The colonization narrative was a Christian narrative. We know this. Those who left Europe to settle in the new world did so with assumption that what they were doing was God’s will. When they arrived in North America, they devastated native populations in a variety of ways for centuries, all the while assuming that their efforts were divinely inspired.

Sometimes, it is easy for Mennonites to disassociate from this past. I had moments like this during the symposium. In those moments, I felt defensive. Many of us are children or grandchildren of Mennonite immigrants and refugees, if not so ourselves. It is easy for us to say that colonization is not our problem – that it is not part of our history. We as Mennonites have known displacement. Most of our history is defined by loss of land.

On a personal level, this concept of displacement struck a chord with me, not just as a Mennonite but in my own life journey. As a baby my parents moved me from Winnipeg

to Kitchener-Waterloo, and then again to St. Catharines, several years later. When it came time for me to go to university, I moved again to Waterloo. Upon completing my undergrad, I moved to Guatemala for a one-year SALT term, and I followed that with a move to Saskatchewan. In lonely moments I have struggled with this feeling of a lost sense of self. And of course, in my history, I also come from a long line of people who moved from place to place. My paternal great-grandparents left Russia during the revolution. My maternal grandparents were refugees during the second world war. As I said, this is a common story among Mennonite families. What do we do with this reality? How do we acknowledge this and still own our part in the unequal and unjust treatment of our First Nations neighbours?

Our ancestors came to Canada and adopted all the privileges that our European cousins had been monopolizing for years. Many of these Mennonite settlers were “given” farmland that was stolen from First Nations communities. We adopted the same lens as the long-settled colonizers before us – that this land was best utilized by agriculture. That untamed land was wasteful. We assimilated into the colonialism narrative. But we were also suffering from something else.

Alistair Reese, who spent many years studying and working with the Maori people of New Zealand, explained the experience of settlers as an existential crisis. Identity, so often for people, is tied to place. Settlers were inherently displaced, not only from their homeland, but from their sense of self. Mennonites are no strangers to this. Our history IS displacement, often forced displacement.

In my preparation for NAIITS symposium I read the [*The Inconvenient Indian – A Curious Account of Native People in North America*](#), by Thomas King. (Thanks Eileen – I can finally return it to you!) In this book, King claims that what White people have always wanted is not assimilation or Christianization of indigenous people – those things are secondary. Ultimately what White People have always wanted is land. Everything else is a means to this end. King adds that this desire for land is driven by an even deeper desire for control. Control is about existential security – the need to feel completely secure in who we are. If we don’t have control over our environment, our identity is threatened.

Two brilliant speakers, [Adrian Jacobs and Jennifer Henry](#), spoke about something particularly moving for me – that no one owns land. Land belongs to God. Asking what we own and what land we CAN call ours is the wrong question. Instead, we need to ask what land owns us. Moreover, what community owns us? What and who are we responsible to?

We are all treaty people. Not just because the treaties were made for all peoples living on this land, settlers and indigenous people alike. But we are all treaty people because we are people of God. God IS treaty. Treaties are more than political articles that

determine right to land. It is time that we view the treaties as covenant, as an embodiment of God's promise. This paradigm shift is an important one. It reframes the treaties, not just as a rental agreement, but as a reminder that we are responsible to all people who live on God's earth. Our identity is not bound to place, or to what we own, but in our relationship to all of God's creation. There is responsibility in this, but there is great joy in it too.

MICHELLE::

I feel filled with anger and shame, and that serves as motivation

-The conference put me face to face with the issues and challenged we have before us for reconciliation, and I want to pass those challenging feelings on to you.

-Throughout the conference I felt a lot of anger towards the state of things, and shame for my ethnic ancestors role in colonization. But I realized my shame is self serving, and does nothing to solve the issues, so I used my anger and shame to power my overall feeling of motivation. Motivation to make changes wherever possible, and to use my privilege to challenge power and privilege where I see it.

-Reconciliation:

-as an ongoing process and everyone's responsibility, recovering a relationship that was never healthy to begin with.

-A "social weaving": a craft that is honed and practiced. Leads to relationship.

-As settlers reconciliation means: it's important that we listen with heart, and lean into the discomfort of our shared history, recognizing what it means to be a settler and to inherit our history and all of the responsibilities that come with a treaty relationship.

-Viewing Indigenous people as victims only serves to perpetuate paternalism and continues the unhealthy power dynamic. They are resilient and have never needed our pity, they need the partnership they signed up for.

-Treaties are bills of rights for settlers, they are what allow us to be here. They were offered in good faith, but we have not lived in good faith within the treaty.

-Colonization is continuing even now on a personal and political level in our country, and our solutions to longtime issues tend to be suggesting that people basically just finish the assimilation started in residential schools, which is not a solution at all.

-If you affirm Indigenous dignity while rejecting Indigenous sovereignty then it is a false friendship.

- de-centering whiteness, uncovering our creation of the "other", recognizing the way we tell history is racist (indigenous people as part of the flora and fauna, civilizing whites, etc), narratives are not value free (winner writes history)

-We have so much to learn from our indigenous neighbours, and the fact that most of them are so willing to share their knowledge with us is frankly amazing considering the state of our relationship.

-Now that you all feel the righteous anger turned motivation that I feel :) I will add some recommendations and some practical advice at the end of our talk.

JOE:

How did I feel about the NAIITS conference? Like the others, that's a complicated. I guess I'd say, mostly, I felt disturbed. Also awkward and more than a bit defensive, but mostly, disturbed.

One moment from the conference that stayed with me was a conflict between two people. At one point one of the presenters made a comment about how scientific studies suggest that humanity as a species originated from Africa, and so at some deep level, in our DNA, we all have this connection to these common African beginnings.

And when he said that, I quickly fell in line with his point, marvelling at the interconnectedness of humanity and that our commonalities are far greater than our differences. And then he moved on and so did I, because that's a really obvious fact, human life began in Africa and spread out from there around the globe.

But [during the Q-and-A session afterwards](#) (1:05 to 1:09), an Anishinaabe woman from Northern Ontario stood up and said this:

"My people didn't come from Africa! Africans came from Africa. My white ancestors came from Europe. My Anishinaabe ancestors came from Turtle Island. We didn't come from somewhere to Turtle Island, we are here because that's where God created us."

Honestly, my first reaction was to be embarrassed for her. What a ridiculous idea, quaint, really. I mean come on, science is very clear that the oldest humans lived in Africa. We know this for a fact.

Well, I mean, I don't personally know it for a fact, I haven't seen the evidence first-hand and I really don't know the specifics of any of the theories. But I've been told that that's true by sources I trust, and surely they have their facts straight. And the facts say that we all come from Africa.

Well, I guess the facts don't actually say that themselves. Technically, the facts are pulled together and interpreted into various theories by scientists trying to make sense of all the facts.

Well, not exactly *all the facts*--we simply don't have all the facts, what we have access to is only a tiny fraction of the facts. And that's why science deals only in theories, because scientists are ready to rethink things when new facts are uncovered. That's one of the reasons that I trust them, actually, that scientists don't claim to have eternal truth, especially on something like a theory of human development which is based on a relative few fragments of clues that have survived for hundreds of thousands of years. It

would be ridiculous to make broad claims about human origins with any degree of certainty. We think we know some things, but we just don't have enough facts, not yet anyway.

Wait, then, so why am I so embarrassed for this woman who is presenting a different understanding of these "facts" that I don't actually know anything about myself? Why am I so certain that I know better than she does?

I feel this great confidence in my worldview because I think that it's built on reason and observation and science. *But reason and observation and science are actually far more skeptical and far less certain about what it claims to know than I am.*

True science on its own terms acknowledges its limits and the gaps in its knowledge. Me, I don't like to do that very much.

[As Jesus said](#), I love to point out the dust in the eyes of the other, while ignoring the two-by-fours in my own eyes (Matt 7:1-5).

That Anishinaabe woman, I can't remember her name, she asked if that story about all humanity coming out of Africa, is actually part of white supremacy.

And I wonder if she's right? What if the reason for my allegiance to that "truth" is actually how well it fits into the story of my life. I mean, of course I find it easy to believe that humans started in one place and then went exploring and spread out over the whole world. That's kind of the story of my people, exploration, expansion, moving out and moving in and taking over, that's what we've done. That's the story of my life, moving around, moving in, making my home wherever I choose. It's really, really, easy for me to believe a scientific story that confirms it's not just me, but this is human nature.

But contrast that with the story of Indigenous people, with this one Indigenous woman, whose life and culture is defined not by moving and growing and conquering, but by remaining and enduring and truly belonging in and on and with a particular place.

Why am I so skeptical of that story? Why do thoughts spring to mind about how naive that is, that humans can't actually live like that, that her ancestors were also violent and greedy, that every tribe tries to dominate others, that civilization is always bloody, that that's human nature, that's just how the world works.

But is it? Who's to say how the world works? That's the story of me and my people, that's our history for sure. But how can I say that that's how the world works, all people and all places? That's a pretty self-serving conclusion.

And that's white supremacy, in me, anyway. Here is a gentle, thoughtful, courageous Anishinaabe woman, not only telling me that the story of her people is different but actually showing me through her hospitality and graciousness.

And my response is to tell her that she's wrong about her people and herself, that humans are selfish and destructive and deceitful and domineering.

And that she's foolish to believe otherwise.

That's white supremacy, not "out there" but in here, in me. And that's disturbing me.

And it begs the question, which of us should really be in charge? What would a world look like where those of us with power would share it with people like her?

But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the True Human came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." ([Matthew 20:25-28](#))

MICHAELA:

-Emotional lens - "How did our experiences make us feel?" These conversations reach the core of who we are.

-What does it mean to be white, a settler, an indigenous person, a Canadian?

-They are inherently unsettling questions.

-Emotions help us look inward - what do we fear, what are our own prejudices, assumptions and barriers

-If we can be honest, open, we can achieve reconciliation, but we have to be ready to feel uncomfortable.

MICHELLE: What now?

-Do research on the treaties, the calls to action (ongoing, no end to reconciliation even if all calls to action are fulfilled). All about means, without concern for an end.

-Read "[Strength for Climbing](#)" resource by Kairos Canada: very good practical steps and resources.

-recognize that the TRC is not perfect, there is no pan-indigenous identity, and we can't aim for one just to make our lives easier

-speak with other people, listen to their stories without defensiveness, people want to feel heard and recognized.

-use your privilege to challenge racism or discrimination

- remember that politics are people's lives, they cannot walk away from their ethnicity.
- behavioural changes, check yourself, recognize that fighting racism within yourself is a lifetime process
- Don't be settled ->systems are designed to calm us down, don't let them.

Listen in on some of the full talks at NAIITS from a diverse group of presenters:

[“Theologies of Justice” aka “Racism and stuff...#amiright?”](#) with Erna Hackett

[“White Supremacy: A Brief History in North America”](#) with Dr. Terry LeBlanc

[“Treaty as Fragility Prevalentative”](#) with Jennifer Henry and Adrian Jacobs”

[“Racism: The Australian Way”](#) with Patricia Courtenay

[“Indigenous Generosity, Treaties, and Reconciliation”](#) with Alistair Reese