

Reconciling with The People and the Land?

What is truth and reconciliation to this Secwepemc-Syilx (Shuswap-Okanagan) woman whose homelands lie within a geo-political state where the Prime Minister claims, “*We also have no history of colonialism*”?¹ How does that lack of political will trickle down to the day-to-day activities of my life? I did not attend residential school but my Mother, Aunt, and Uncles did. However, I am a survivor of the “60s Scoop,” which was the next wave of assimilation policies that separated me from my Indigenous family and put me in five foster homes in five years time. I ran away every time to go home to see my Granny. She told me, “Go to school, we need to know how those people think.”

Luckily, I have a mind for school, but before I could pursue my academic studies, I had to deal with some harsh life lessons that had me “wast[ing] a lot of time spinning my wheels in a destructive anger.”² In the late 1980s, I started consciously to seek healing from the horrific life experiences that colonialism wrought upon me, my family, and my community. In order to do that, I put Indigenous and settler relationships under scrutiny. Like most people, I only thought of white people as settlers; however, as my healing journey evolved and my experience expanded I turned my attention to non-white settlers too. My examination of Indigenous intersections with non-white settlers from other races, identities, and cultural groups consciously³ started when I began working on a diverse team of producers with Rita Shelton Deverell at Vision TV where I met Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians who came from many different races and cultures. This article is a reflection on some of my healing journey; part of that is seeking a peaceful co-existence with settler folks.

The slide plate under my microscope focused in a very up-close and personal way during the so-called 1990 Oka Crisis in Mohawk territory and then the 1995 Gustafsen Lake standoff in Secwepemc territory. I worked behind the scenes in communications at these two armed land rights conflicts to elevate consciousness to the international media. During the Gustafsen Lake standoff, Ipperwash was happening in Ontario at the same time. I experienced first-hand the psychological warfare of the Canadian military.⁴ My healing journey towards my truth and reconciliation with the settler

peoples was catapulted forward by these two life-changing events. Since these modern-day Indian wars where two lives were lost⁵ I have been asking, “Is it possible to have peaceful co-existence within a state that denies its colonial history and will mobilize their military against the Original Peoples?”

During the 1990s, a highly volatile time in Canada, Indigenous communications were largely ignored by the national media while most sensationalized the violence and promoted coverage that “racialized and criminalized” images of the people defending the land rights. In the 1990 78-day siege, only one media outlet, the multi-faith and multicultural broadcaster, Vision TV, picked up on my press releases about a peaceful, spiritual cross-country run initiated by the Syilx (Okanagan) and the Secwepemc (Shuswap). In 1995, during the Gustafsen Lake standoff, my cell phone was scrambled and the RCMP media liaison tried to exclude me from the press scrums. I refused to be intimidated and declared that I was accredited media and worked for a national broadcaster, but I and my questions were ignored in the subsequent press scrums where I was the only person of colour.

After 1990 I wanted to leave this country, which had demonstrated such hateful behaviour towards us, but then I thought, “Where would I go, this is my homeland. This is where my people have been for generations and generations!” Since then I have often wondered what immigrants think when they come to this country. I wonder what it feels like to leave their homelands, especially the more recent immigrant groups who are largely non-white and are forced to leave their traditional lands because of war, political instability, or other untenable circumstances.

Many other questions arose in the following decade while I uncovered what truth and reconciliation mean to me. My interrogation centred on how Indigenous peoples relate to the settler peoples who have chosen our homelands as their place of residency. This line of questioning motivated my engagement in many activities. When I examine my personal and political involvements since the 1990s, I see that my work has focused on many facets of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in Canada.

Following Oka, I developed a relationship with Rita Shelton Deverell who was then Vice-President of Production and Presentation at Vision TV and one of the founders of the specialty station, which is the only multi-faith broadcaster in the world. She mentored and trained me to produce for television and contracted me as part of a team of multi-faith and multicultural producers from across Canada for eight television seasons. Rita’s leadership had a critical impact in my quest of examining whether or not a peaceful coexistence was possible with settler cultures in Canada.

One significant memory I have is at an annual party at Rita's home in Toronto. I remember standing at the edge of the room with my camera eye on and watching my fellow producers from all cultures and faith groups, some of them dressed in their traditional garb, dancing, and some people laughing as they engaged in lively conversations. I thought how incredible this scene was, and I wished Canadians could see this. Here we were individuals from the spectrum of the multicultural mosaic of Canada, all working towards upholding the mandate of the program, which included peace. This does not mean we all agreed on political, social, or spiritual issues; however, we were able to go beyond the parameters of the "tolerance" policies of diversity and actually extend respect to each other's point of view. I have come to recognize my time at Vision TV as a very blessed experience because racism, sexism, and homophobia were given assumptions when producing our stories. I may have an idealistic memory of my experience because I was not located in Toronto where, no doubt, there were the usual office politics that I was thankfully not a part of. However, I do know from this experience that it is possible to work in a peaceful way while coexisting with other cultural groups in the cultural interface.

Throughout the evolution of my multi-dimensional identity—that is, my personal, political, social, spiritual, and academic development—I have looked closely at the intersections of race, identity, and culture, including the multiple histories of the settler peoples in coexistence with Indigenous peoples. My quest started by examining the "white people" settlers, which I discuss extensively in *The History of a Friendship or Some Thoughts on Becoming Allies*.⁶

In my history with Victoria Freeman, a thirteenth-generation North American settler,⁷ we have decolonized ourselves and looked at what institutional decolonization might look like. Decolonization is one of those big conceptual words that encompass many things and no doubt means different things to different people. For me it meant dealing with the deeply embedded racism we felt towards each other and deconstructing the many preconceived notions we had about each other to finally reach a place where we can honour each other's dignity and achieve a true reconciliation as human beings. Luckily, both Victoria and I had the tenacity and desire to develop our *decolonized* relationship. It is a difficult and sometimes heartbreaking process that requires a level of commitment to a relationship that is rarely found in friendships.

In 2003, Victoria and I were invited to a conference in Switzerland where we addressed an audience of 700 people from diverse cultures from around

the world. We co-presented about our colonizer-colonized relationship in Canada. In my talk, I suggested the colonization process was brutal and that both sides of the colonial divide needed to engage in a healing process. However, before healing could begin, the reality of the situation had to be acknowledged.

When referring to my relationship with the colonizers of my land, many times I apply the metaphor of an abusive relationship; that is, as a 'colonized' person I am the assumed victim, and the colonial state, including the settlers, is the offender. In an abusive relationship, the offender controls the situation with a constant threat of violence that creates a situation where both parties 'walk on eggshells' around each other because at any given moment violence may erupt. In the dysfunctional relationship between Indigenous peoples and the settler peoples of North America, there is an undefined 'walking on eggshells' that sits between us as a 'pregnant pause' or as a very LOUD silence.⁸

I see the three armed conflicts in Canada during the 1990s as Indigenous peoples "breaking the silence" about the abusive behaviour of the colonizing settler governments in Canada. When a victim breaks the silence in an abusive relationship, this is a clear call for change because the status quo of the old relationship is no longer acceptable. If both parties take responsibility for their actions and/or non-actions, then the healing can begin.

In our old relationship with the settlers, there is a normalized notion of white European settler peoples; however, in this time of globalization, the settler face has changed to include the faces of the many, many other peoples from diverse cultures who immigrate to our homelands, seeking a new home. Now the settler face includes people from all the countries of the African continent, people from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, India, Pakistan, Eastern Europe, countries of the Middle East, the South East Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, and people from the UK, Australia, and New Zealand continue to immigrate to these lands.

In 2002, when writer Lee Maracle was scholar-in-residence at the University of Western Washington in Bellingham, she hosted a conference to discuss Native-Chinese relations that set off a chain of involvements for me. In 2004, I started researching a film on Native-Chinese relations in my territories, which started an exploration of the relationship with one of the longest standing, non-white settler communities in Canada. I found stories in our shared oral histories that revealed how Indigenous peoples have familial relationships with the Chinese that started in the late 1800s.⁹ I discovered that economic partnerships were developed in the mid-1950s in the interior of BC where Chinese farmers leased lands on reserve and hired Indigenous people. In August 2004, I was invited to speak at a "Walk with Women Warriors" workshop in Chinatown¹⁰ where I acknowledged our shared

oppressions and discussed some of the shared history I had uncovered.¹¹ At the end of my talk, I asked the Chinese community who would be standing next to me the next time an army tank is coming at me? Since then my conversation with the settler peoples of Canada has expanded and evolved.

In September 2007, I was invited to participate on a conference panel, “Women, Resistance, and Cultural/Community Activism—Catalyzing Agents: The Ethics of Doing ‘Asian Canadian,’”¹² where I took the opportunity to expand the conversation, beyond the Chinese–Canadian communities, to include the Japanese–Canadian and Indo–Canadian participants. I explained that this was not a comfortable conversation for me as the only Indigenous person in the room; however, growth and change can only happen when we deal with the hard issues. At the end of my presentation, I asked them *when* they were going to start giving back to the lands they had chosen as their new home and, also, *what* they would give back.

In February 2009, I was invited to do a keynote address at the University of Victoria’s Diversity Conference, “Critical Conversation Continue,” where the spectrum of settler communities was represented in the community-engaged researchers, students, faculty, and community members. My talk was an hour long so I was able to link a number of issues; however, the primary focus was media (mis)representation of Indigenous peoples in Canadian programming. I started with *wartime images*, *peacetime images*, and then discussed *alliance building*. In looking at how the Canadian screen culture manages the visual narratives about Indigenous peoples, I gave a critical analysis of some of the television programming in Canada. In my keynote address, I included:

How many of you watch Canadian TV? Have any of you seen *The Border*? It’s quite an exciting and very dynamic series produced by Peter Raymont at the CBC. It’s been receiving lots of attention. I make a point of watching it, not only because I like the stories but because from time to time, they include Indigenous people in their scripts. The writers of that series have not erased us. They are dealing with contemporary race issues in Canada at the fictional immigration agency.

On the other hand, another CBC series, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* totally exists in a bubble. Apparently, this Muslim community in Saskatchewan has no Cree, Métis or Sioux people in that little town. I stopped watching the series when I saw that we weren’t included in the scripts. I sent a question via their blog; I asked the writers of the series why their scripts do not include the Indigenous peoples of Saskatchewan. And of course I have not had a response. Ironically, this series has been syndicated in the Middle East where the land issue between the Palestinians and the Israelis is the cause of a major war (that has huge global implications); yet, here in Canada they do not deal with the original peoples who also contest the presence of the settlers on the land.¹³

While I understand the necessity of creative freedom in writing scripts, is it not the ethical responsibility of the writers of Canadian series television to also address the complexities of living on the lands of the Original Peoples? How many Canadian producers hire Indigenous writers for their writing teams? When will Canadian producers stop bringing us in as mere “cultural consultants” for our opinions/suggestions, which are rarely incorporated and hardly ever includes the opportunity to submit an invoice for our time? When will they start hiring us for the substantive key creative positions as directors, directors of photography, or as supervising editors? There are enough of us with experience and training now.

It’s complicated, but it is all interrelated. At the University of Victoria, I also linked Indigenous-settler relations in terms of the environment; the lands that people have chosen to make their home. At the Victoria conference I explained how, in many Indigenous cultures, there is a concept of *giving back*—it is complicated yet very simple. For instance, when we go out on the land, we don’t take more than what is to be used for that season. If a person is being responsible, they will give back to the land by taking care of their picking grounds, they will do what is needed to take care of those lands that provide food. Another simpler example is when we go and harvest trees and branches to build a sweat lodge, we offer tobacco and ask the tree for its blessing as we explain what the branches are to be used for. Of course, I acknowledge it is much more complicated in human relations. My point is, we can’t just keep taking and taking and taking and not give something back.

Settler peoples come from all over the world to these lands to reap the benefits of this land of milk and honey, and they send their financial and other resources to their homelands. What do they give back to the Original Peoples of these lands? Do they ever take the time to learn about the Indigenous people whose lands they occupy?

In the healing process, once the silence is broken and each party is taking responsibility for their part of the relationship and relating to each other as dignified, autonomous human beings, then a new relationship can begin. I see that a new way of being in the cultural interface of Indigenous peoples and all settler communities has to begin with a shared active engagement in the decolonizing process while simultaneously participating in a cultural healing of both communities, which I believe is necessary for both Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous settler peoples of Canada.

One of the major things I have learned from my intercultural relationships with both white and non-white settlers is that it is critical to relate outside of the usual colonial binary of the colonizer and the colonized. In this

approach, Indigenous peoples are consistently relegated to the “victim” role, which paralyzes our ability to assume responsibility for our actions and locks us in the perceptions of the common stereotypes; that is, the “noble savage,” Hollywood’s monosyllabic Tonto, the stoic cigar store Indian, the rebellious Billy Jack hero, the natural environmentalist, or the all-knowing spiritual Medicine Man or Woman. You know, the one with all that “woo-woo” spiritual energy who can do magical things!

In my intercultural work, the primary focus has been searching for and trying to understand what “peaceful coexistence” means in the cultural interface for Indigenous peoples who want to maintain their ancestral ties to their homelands, yet work together with the larger societies in seeking a sustainable environment where Indigenous peoples can finally realize some economic benefits. How can we work together? How do we stand together in alliances to fend off the globalization machine that perpetuates a neo-colonial approach? The land is integral to Indigenous cultures and, I argue, is the cause for the very “LOUD silence” that sits between us because “I believe this is founded in the fear that Indigenous peoples want the land back, that our suppressed rage compounded over centuries will explode at any given time on any given territory.”¹⁴

Settlers know that the original peoples of Canada have a birthright to our lands and any benefits from its resources. I truly believe the denial of this entitlement and the lack of integrity that the settler governments have in the colonial relationship is at the core of this fear. Settler governments know they have assumed a privilege and an entitlement to these lands; yet, at the same time they deny the privilege and entitlement of Indigenous peoples.¹⁵

Although many Canadians in the interfaith groups and cultural activists may theoretically understand the lack of integrity of the governments assuming this privilege on the land, it is difficult to exercise effective political actions that may change the status quo, because any real change is neutralized by diversity policies.

Over the years, I have witnessed how we come together oh-so-politely under the diversity policies that promote being tolerant of each other. I have sat in meetings where we are working together on a shared goal; however, when it comes to the human part of developing relationships, many people have to run to other meetings, answer phone calls/texts, or some other *more important* activities. Admittedly, most of the people who are engaged in intercultural/interfaith work are overtaxed as it is, and until we take the time to get to know each other as human beings, I see the activist community getting stuck in the policies of regulating aversion,¹⁶ rather than engaging in a truly respectful, collaborative, and peaceful approach. In her book,

Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in an Age of Identity and Empire, Wendy Brown says, “It is noteworthy, too, that within this [tolerance] discourse the aim of learning tolerance is not to arrive at equality or solidarity with others but, rather, to learn how to put up with others.”¹⁷ If what Brown says is true that the tolerance discourse of Western liberalism regulates the presence of the Other both inside and outside the liberal democratic nation-state and that the notion of tolerance “affects all levels and domains of civil engagement”¹⁸ while it acts as a “substitute for or as a supplement to formal liberal equality [that can] block the pursuit of substantive equality and freedom,”¹⁹ then individuals and groups within the nation-state of Canada need to formulate new models of interrelating outside a tolerance discourse (including diversity or multicultural policies) that literally paralyzes a substantive reconciliation in this pluralistic society.

For me, part of reconciliation is taking the time to build respectful relationships and to create opportunities where we develop a new model of interrelating, a model that takes us beyond the usual multicultural sharing of food and dance and walks towards an authentic reconciliation. This will require a complex, multi-faceted approach; however, if the political will and desire of settler and Indigenous communities are there, I truly believe it is possible to build a peaceful coexistence with each other.

Some of this is happening all across the country;²⁰ however, there are still complications and contradictions to the Indigenous reality in Canada that cause incongruent perceptions. The spin doctors for the provincial and federal governments in Canada perpetuate many myths about our reality. The mainstream media manage mainstream Canada’s perceptions of us by writing about how privileged we are to be receiving tax exemption, yet they do not write about the long overdue back rent that is owed to our communities. If we are so privileged, then why are our suicide rates in our communities so high? Why are our men and women overrepresented in prison populations? Why are our women being murdered and disappearing off the streets and highways of this country? Why are our kids still not graduating from high school? And, why is there still a need for our kids to be in foster homes?

Is it not time for Canada to take true responsibility for its violent history with the Indigenous populations of these lands? Oh, I know we had a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1991 (after the three Modern-Day Indian Wars), then we had an apology from the Prime Minister in 2008, and now we have the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. My questions are: Will this be another commission that the mainstream media will regularly report as one

whose costs come out of the Canadian taxpayers' pockets? And, will this be yet another lovely report that will sit on the shelves of many bureaucrats' offices, and that Indigenous political leaders refer to in pursuing real actions to bring about social change?

In a dysfunctional violent relationship, the abuser often pays off their victim; that is, if the abuser is a man, he will buy dresses, jewellery, vacations, and new cars to maintain the silence, to maintain the status quo. I do not mean to diminish the experience of the residential school Survivors; however, I wonder if this is what happened in the apology and the compensations that some people received for the horrific experiences they had as children. Have we been bought off?

It is time to set the record straight—we are NOT one of the special interest groups that the so-called liberal democracy of Canada is managing. We, as the Original Peoples of this country, have a unique social, political, and legal position because our Aboriginal Rights and Title are constitutionally protected in Canada. The policy-makers of the so-called diversity or multicultural policies in this country need to acknowledge that difference, rather than pitting us against the Other communities of colour.

The time has come for both parties of the dysfunctional, violent relationship to change the status quo in Canada by enacting an authentic reconciliation²¹ that requires hard work on both sides. Indigenous Peoples are doing our part, slowly but surely—healing ourselves, our families, our communities, our Nations. When is Canada going to step up to the plate and start writing policies that bring about real change and not just manage how they tolerate our presence? What is each immigrant group going to do about building relationships with the peoples whose lands they reside on?

Notes

- 1 Stephen Harper made this statement at a G20 meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in September 2009 after he made the apology to residential school Survivors in Canada's legislature in 2008. Retrieved 4 April 2010 from Harsha Walia Blog at: <http://communities.canada.com/vancouver.sun/blogs/communityofinterest/archive/2009/09/28/really-harper-canada-has-no-history-of-colonialism.aspx>
- 2 Christian, D. and V. Freeman (2010). The history of a friendship or some thoughts on becoming allies. In L. Davis (ed.). *Alliances: Re/Envisioning Indigenous-non-Indigenous Relationships*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- 3 I say consciously because when I was a child I read the book, *Black Like Me*, by John Howard Griffin. I distinctly remember hiding under the covers reading this book with a flashlight. I wonder if this is when I started questioning race? Griffin, John Howard (1961). *Black Like Me*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

- 4 Christian and Freeman (2010).
- 5 Corporal Lemay was killed at Oka in 1990. In 1995 while Gustafsen Lake was occurring in British Columbia, Dudley George was killed at Ipperwash Park in Ontario.
- 6 Christian and Freeman (2010).
- 7 Freeman is the author of: Freeman, V. (2000). *Distant Relations: How My Ancestors Colonized North America*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart Ltd.
- 8 Christian and Freeman (2010:381).
- 9 I wrote an article for the fall issue of *Rice Paper Magazine* in 2004 discussing some aspects of the historical relationship between Indigenous and Chinese peoples. I named the article "Is it Racism or is it Xenophobia?" and the editors changed the title to "Articulating the Silence." See: Christian, Dorothy (2004). *Articulating the Silence. Rice Paper Magazine* 9(3):22–31.
- 10 Christian, D. (2008:19). *Remapping Activism* (transcript of talk given on 28 August 2004). *West Coast Line* 42(1):15–20.
- 11 It is prudent to acknowledge that in my research of Native–Chinese relations in Canada, I have come to understand the complexities of the diverse Chinese diaspora and realize that the Chinese community is not one monolithic group. There are Chinese immigrants whose families came to these lands in the late 1800s, and the following waves of immigration include: Chinese from Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. The diversity of the Chinese diaspora brings unique cultural and historical experiences of why they chose to come to these lands.
- 12 The conference, *The 1907 Race Riots and Beyond: A Century of TransPacific Canada*, was co-sponsored by University of Victoria, University of British Columbia, and Simon Fraser University and held at SFU's downtown campus.
- 13 Information regarding syndication of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* was retrieved February 2009 from: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20070109.wlivezarqao110/BNStory/specialComment/home>
- 14 Christian and Freeman (2010:381).
- 15 Christian and Freeman (2010:381).
- 16 Brown, W. (2006). *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 17 Brown (2006:184). Wendy Brown's critical analysis of the tolerance discourse and how it functions within contemporary liberal democracies deserves a whole chapter, if not a whole book, in terms of how its findings relate to Indigenous populations within the so-called liberal democracies of this globalized world.
- 18 Brown (2006:8).
- 19 Brown (2006:9).
- 20 At the 2006 Re-Envisioning Relationships Conference at Trent University, I witnessed many projects across this country where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples were working together towards a peaceful coexistence by building alliances outside the usual colonial relationship. These efforts are documented in: Davis, Lynne (ed.) (2010).
- 21 The theoretical framework for what I understand to be an "authentic reconciliation" comes from: Sutherland, Jessie (2005). *Worldview Skills: Transforming Conflict from the Inside Out*. Sooke, BC: Worldview Strategies Publications. See pages 19–40.