

From the Editor

From Bi-culturalism, Multiculturalism, to a Treaty Nation: Re-Writing a Story of Indigenous Community Engagement in Canada

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Our Journal is pleased to present its long-anticipated special issue on the scholarship of community engagement with Indigenous communities. The Journal's Advisory Board has identified Indigenous engagement as a priority focus for our Journal and its special issues. Perhaps this emphasis is not surprising for those based in Canada, as Canadians have been witnessing and living through significant societal transformations that have recently gained momentum in Canada. Let me first share a story.

From 2012 to 2015, together with my students, I ran an oral history project called *Oral History of 20th Street: Many Faces of a City Core Neighbourhood*. Our project grew out of a realization that given ongoing urban development and the rapid gentrification of the neighbourhood, the current makeup of 20th Street could soon disappear. One of the oldest in Saskatoon, 20th Street has a rich and culturally-layered history; many different people and communities called it home. Throughout its history, 20th Street was known in the city for its unique 'cultural' or 'ethnic' flair, be it Indigenous, East Asian or Eastern European. From the early- to mid-20th century, the street was a bustling commercial area but, by the end of the same century, it was associated with poverty, gang wars, and general economic decline. More recently, the neighbourhood attracted developers and new businesses, betting on the commercial potential of the area.

Following students' own interests in various aspects of the 20th Street history, we recorded diverse stories from the neighbourhood, shared by the residents and those who worked in the neighbourhood. Some stories were related to us by former homeless individuals, economically deprived mothers whose children were taken away into foster care, former gang members, and the patrons of local charity organizations. Other stories were shared by social workers, church officials, politicians, local businessmen, and even university professors involved in various social justice projects in the neighbourhood.

At the start of our project, 20th Street was perceived by some in the city as an uncertain place to visit, and some of the white middle-class student researchers were initially quite apprehensive when it came to collaborating with individuals from a milieu other than their



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(Photo: Erin J. Weiss)

own. In the end, these individuals' stories had the most impact on the students as attested by their field assignments and group discussions. I worked on this project over three years, with three different groups of students. At the end of each course, students shared their research findings in a presentation panel held in the community. These public presentations allowed student participants and community members to appreciate the scope and impact of each story recorded.

In 2012, one story stood out. It was told by a then 50-year-old Cree gentleman who worked at a local charity organization and was well-known in Saskatoon as an advocate for homeless youth. Albert (name changed) shared with a student researcher the story of his entire life and not only the story of his involvement with the neighbourhood. Born on the reserve in the north, he was forcefully removed from his family at the age of 5 and sent to a residential school for the Indigenous children, far from his own community. In the residential school everybody spoke English but he spoke Cree, so it was hard for him as a small boy to adapt to the unfamiliar and non-familial institutional environment. He was separated from his siblings. Parental visits were discouraged. Food was different and not good. From that school he tried to escape several times. He successfully ran away when he was 8, but soon after was brought back to the school by the authorities. He survived typhoid, from which he suffered lifelong weaknesses. Having been forced to spend his entire youth in the residential school, he grew quite detached from his family, community, language and culture. Later on in life, having been brought up outside of his family and community, he had difficulty settling down. His relationships did not last, but he continued to be a committed father to his children. He told a story of how he found an abandoned baby in the woods and brought that baby into his own home. While he was struggling to make ends meet, he eventually raised the girl as his own daughter, along with his other children. For some time, he lived as a homeless person. A wanderer without a steady job or steady income, he knew alcohol abuse too well.

Albert's account is one of many other stories of continued marginalization and discrimination to which Canada's many Indigenous people have been subjected throughout their participation in the Canadian national project. The story affected my non-Indigenous students profoundly, as they were not familiar with such life experiences. It seemed to them like a scene from another world, a 'faraway' country. Yet, this was a story of someone living right in their own city. One of the reasons some students felt emotionally displaced when encountering Albert's story is that, until recently, similar stories of Indigenous peoples' experiences of systemic discrimination and resistance were not circulating in mainstream (predominantly white, middle-class) Canadian society. Stories like Albert's were neither welcome for such circulation nor included in the Canadian meta-narrative of nation-building. They were too inconvenient to account for within the framework of an accepted national story of Canada's beginnings.

For a long time, mainstream Canada and the Canadians have known their history of nation building as a history of Anglo-Saxon and French 'successful' expansions into what was referred to as a 'new world', of conquering and settling its lands. These 'successes' eventually led to the establishment of a nation that understood itself as comprised by two dominant

‘founding’ cultures, two national languages, and the federation as the principle of their political union. This bi-culturalism was for some time seen as the only explanation for how Canada as a modern nation came to be, as two competing colonial forces came to terms with respect to their own, now shared, dominion and dominance over Canadian lands.

Then in the 1970s, bi-culturalism gave way to another vision of Canada, inspired to a great degree by the policy of multiculturalism. This new state policy became the next lenses through which many started reassessing the Canadian story of origin. Such reassessment was especially of interest to long-established ethnic minorities the Canadian government had once recruited to settle its Western frontier and build the railroads. First as a national policy and then as a lived set of practices, multiculturalism produced many versions of how Canada was built and what Canada was as a nation. Room was made for ‘other’ stories of nation-building.

At the same time, the colonial foundations upon which bicultural Canada was conceived remained unchallenged. Canadian ethnic minorities eagerly contributed to the national meta-narrative of origin of a strong and undivided Canada, reassuring the others that they, as ethnic minorities, were the nation builders as well. Every year in Saskatchewan, the provincial branch of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress awards those most deserving with a medal that states exactly this – the “Nation Builder Award”. Similar acknowledgements to celebrate ethnic ‘nation builders’ have been produced by other ethnic groups who have some voice in the multicultural Canadian establishment. Grievances were certainly brought forward as well, as Ukrainian, Chinese, and Japanese Canadians pursued the Canadian government for redress with respect to previous injustice and discrimination these groups had been subject to in one historical period or another. To convey a message to the political establishment, these ethnic minorities began forging their own narratives of participation in the Canadian nation, focusing predominantly on how they were in fact contributing to one, now multicultural Canada.

Yet, their contribution to the story of Canada’s origins, even if at times focused on the wrongdoings of previous governments, still effectively echoed the early Anglo-Saxon and French Canadian meta-narrative of nation-building, with the notion of ‘success’ as the core message. Despite its oftentimes celebratory rethorics, multiculturalism, as the government’s policy *and* the lived practice of many Canadian ethnic communities with roots in the Canadian frontier, continued contributing to and reproducing the same colonial dichotomy and power imbalance as the previous bicultural model of Canada. The multicultural vision of Canada also effectively excluded Albert’s experiences, as his story was certainly not fitting the mainstream understandings of success and nation building.

It has taken a few more decades for Canada to embark again on a transformative path towards reevaluation of its own narrative of origin. This time around, Albert’s life story of systemic marginalization and discrimination as an Indigenous person mattered. In historical terms, this journey is just beginning, first informed by land disputes pursued by various Indigenous nations across Canada, and then by a growing resistance movement for Indigenous rights, sovereignty, and respect for treaties. Escalated land disputes, such as for example the Oka Resistance in 1990, led to the 1992 establishment of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. The goal of this commission was to address the deep political and cultural polarization

that characterized the relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples of Canada. Various grassroots Indigenous networks of resistance arose since the 1990s, focusing on environment protection and economic and social inequality. This has culminated in 2012 with the powerful Idle No More movement, recognized as one of the largest and most impactful Indigenous movements in Canadian history.

Sustained Indigenous political activism launched a new dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, leading to renewed negotiations in Canada on the meaning of the Canadian nation. This time, Alber's story comes to the foreground of the negotiations. Though there are many other Indigenous stories that do not resemble Albert's, his life does mirror the experiences of many who had been forcefully enrolled in Canada's residential school system. Set up in the 1870s by both Christian churches and the Canadian government, the 'Indian Residential School' system was ultimately created in an effort to assimilate Indigenous youth into mainstream Canadian society. In the operation for more than one hundred years, this system disrupted individual lives, families, and entire communities, and brought about many long-term complications and heartache for Indigenous peoples across Canada.

Though the last such school was closed in 1996, the reassessment of residential schools and their harmful impact began in the 1980s. First it was individuals who sought justice, often through legal action. They were followed by churches—those who once operated the schools—who began offering official apologies to former students. This long cultural, legal, and political journey towards truth and truthful representation of what happened to students in residential schools culminated in 2005, when the federal government offered a comprehensive compensation package to survivors of abuse at residential schools.

A few years later, in 2008, the federal government followed with its official apology to former students of residential schools. In the same year, as a part of the compensation package, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was established, to "guide and inspire Aboriginal peoples and Canadians in a process of reconciliation and renewed relationships that are based on mutual understanding and respect" (as stated on the Commission's website). During the years of its operation the Commission collected numerous testimonies from the survivors of the residential schools to document, reveal, preserve and share their experiences with all Canadians. The work of the Commission was officially completed in 2015.

Some scholars and political analysts acknowledge that the very spirit of this Commission, with its emphasis on *re*-conciliation, was tinted and in many ways informed by the values and expectations of the dominant, settler culture. Thus, the word 'reconciliation', used in the title of the Commission, presupposes the existence of trust and a harmonious relationship prior to the period of injustice. Yet, many claim that the relationship between settlers and the Indigenous peoples was never truly harmonious or balanced, and had always been constructed in colonial terms. Despite these conceptual shortcomings, the work of the Commission, coupled with the will of the Canadian government to finally redress former injustice, has triggered and continues to inform what appears to be a large-scale renegotiation of the very meaning of what Canada is, and who the Canadians are as a people.

By 2012, when I launched the oral history project, stories like Albert's began to be

actively sought out and publicised, within the framework of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission's mandate was, after all, to inform Canadians of what the 'Indian Residential School' system was like in reality. These and other stories of long-term systemic marginalization of Indigenous people, whether or not related to residential school experiences, are nowadays gaining much currency and are publicly shared across the country, at the same time empowering those who share them.

With these stories in the public domain, the time has come to properly acknowledge their right to be firmly woven into Canada's narrative of nation-building. And a cardinal new version of this narrative is needed, where tropes like 'success' and 'nation-building' are not used as the only vectors and markers of nation formation. This narrative will need to move beyond a multicultural model to account for the unique role Indigenous people have played in the Canadian national project. Thus, the initial use of 'First Nation' in Canada's public discourse signalled a change toward this new model, with its emphasis on Indigenous communities' statuses as the first peoples of Canada. In efforts to lead, or to simply fit into this sweeping societal change, many public organizations, schools, campuses, city councils, and governments in Canada are realigning their priorities, mandates, and agendas. They now choose to incorporate Indigenous voices and Indigenous perspectives on the meanings of the Canadian nation and Canadian citizenship. We are indeed witnessing a turn in history, though it is yet to be seen how truly transformational it will be.

These ongoing efforts at realigning the relationships between Indigenous people and various other segments of Canadian society are something Canadian scholars of community engagement have been involved with for a while. Even before the increased public support towards 'reconciliation,' many Indigenous communities were at the vanguard of both the above discussed societal transformations, and the evolution of Indigenous community-engaged scholarship as it may be understood today. For quite some time, numerous Indigenous communities have been actively using academic expertise, collaborating with historians, anthropologists, and legal scholars to accomplish various goals (especially in the area of land titles reclamation), notably in British Columbia, Quebec, the Atlantic Provinces, and the North. Large areas of Canada are still subject to land claims by Indigenous peoples, where land-surrender treaties were not signed in the past. Present-day collaborations are often accompanied by other kinds of engagement between the Indigenous communities and academics.

Canadian contributions to our special Issue illustrate this new development quite well. Many academia-based CES scholars are also members of Indigenous nations or of Indigenous ancestry. These scholars therefore are intimately aware of the bridges that have to be built between different epistemologies, traditions, and research practices when it comes to collaborative work between Indigenous communities and mainstream academic institutions. Whether or not researchers engaged with Indigenous communities directly acknowledge the link between their work and the ongoing matrix-reloading of the Canadian nation, there is an indisputable correlation between their scholarship and broader sociocultural changes now taking place in Canada.

Though our special issue includes many examples of CES work specific to Canadian Indigenous peoples, we are pleased to share essays focusing on Indigenous communities from other parts of the world as well. Nearly half of all contributions featured in this issue come from outside of Canada, mainly from the United States, but also from Europe and Asia. We are thrilled to bring this vibrant international scholarship to our readership, and we encourage readers to think of the articles not only as an assembly of independent texts, but rather as a polylogue. This extended exchange between many stories, voices, and viewpoints effectively conveys the meta-story of Indigenous community engagement, in partnership with academics—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—in various international contexts. This multi-voiced story is complex, enlightening, and telling, highlighting different cultural and political contexts where Indigenous community engagement takes place.

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