

Envisioning a Reconciled Canada: Lessons in Leadership and Reciprocity from the James Bay Cree and Fifty Years of a Transformative YMCA Program among them

“If the past has been an obstacle and a burden, knowledge of the past is the safest and surest emancipation.”¹ Reconciliation requires knowledge of a negative past and its legacy with which we must still come to terms.² It also requires awareness of the hope, courage and humility with which many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians have sought to redress the burden of the past that weighs most heavily on Indigenous peoples.³ Envisioning a reconciled Canada, however, and cultivating the next generation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders capable of co-creating it, also requires awareness that our shared past is not reducible to what went wrong.

This interdisciplinary Indigenous research project (history, philosophy, anthropology, education and political science) will study the profound and intercultural nature, impact and wider implications of a leadership program that has been transformative for, and because of, at least three generations of predominantly Cree youth from James Bay. More precisely, it will examine the history of a YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) Leaders Corps, established in the Cree community of Moose Factory in 1967. It will situate this history within the broader context of traditional and contemporary James Bay Cree leadership, education and relations. Why did a leadership program with non-Cree origins have an apparently powerful impact on Cree youth? To what extent did it succeed and based on what criteria? Did it succeed despite cultural differences or by tapping into common principles that transcended the cultures in which they found unique expression? Such questions are critical for Canada as it struggles with the legacy of policies aimed at eliminating Indigenous difference as well as an understandably defensive politics of resurgent difference.

For many Canadian citizens, the 150th anniversary of Confederation was no cause for celebration.⁴ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has highlighted the unfinished and contested nature of the Canadian geopolitical project. Indigenous and non-Indigenous reconciliation is high on many public and private agendas.⁵ Yet non-Indigenous and Indigenous scepticism persist and reinforce each other, with one side or the other rejecting forms of reconciliation that either strengthen or weaken Indigenous resurgence and decolonization. The Commission’s Calls to Action have identified numerous specific steps for improving relations and conditions, but many Canadians lack a holistic vision of what a reconciled Canada might look like. Moreover, the intensity of contemporary struggles often detracts from critical reflection on what these struggles might, could or should lead to. In this regard, reconciling Indigenous and non-Indigenous concerns is insufficient. We also have to consider those who do not fit neatly into such binary categories, especially within Indigenous communities themselves. Moose Factory, where I was born and raised, is a case in point.

When one zooms in on Moose Factory and nearby Moosonee, overlapping and sometimes competing Indigenous identities come into focus. Some of the Crees who live here have their traditional hunting grounds in the Moose River watershed; others come from different regions of James Bay and speak distinct dialects of Cree. Few are not without some admixture of European ancestry. Others are identified by it; once known as “halfbreeds,” the majority of them now have “Indian” status. Finally, some have no Cree ancestry, but may be Indigenous or intermarried with Crees.⁶ In the end, few people and relationships fit neatly on either side of various divisions that are too often overemphasized. These divisions include: original Moose Cree members versus transferees from other Omushkego or Eeyou First Nations; Quebec (Eeyou) Cree versus Ontario (Omushkego) Cree; Moose Cree First Nation (Omushkego) versus MoCreebec Council of the Cree Nation (Eeyou); L-dialect versus Y-dialect or N-dialect Cree; and status versus regained-status (Bill C-31) versus non-status.⁷

Questions of reconciliation, resurgence and decolonization are clearly relevant beyond the context of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations as typically defined. In the late 1990s, consultation with elders, leaders and educators in Moose Factory led to my MA thesis on a 19th century conflict.

(Mis)interpretations of this event were feeding into divisive local politics.⁸ Later, after starting my PhD, I co-founded a tri-jurisdictional (Moose Cree, MoCreebec and Moosonee) and grassroots heritage and hospitality association with the motto “Building a Future with our Shared Past.”⁹ This association has faced the challenge of overcoming a resurgent politics of difference that emphasizes divisions instead of the commonalities and relationships among those who call the region home.

One of the strongest commonalities that unites the people of Moose Factory and James Bay is an ethic of reciprocity.¹⁰ This emphasis on relationship and hospitality relies on epistemic integrity and prudence: careful discernment of reality, be it the thickness of river ice or the intentions of a newcomer. It is also founded on self-governance or self-control, which can make the difference between life and death in an unforgiving subarctic environment. Yet, as Cree elder Louis Bird insists, traditional stories repeatedly warn against failures to follow this ethic.¹¹ Historically in the subarctic, interdependence with human and other-than-human persons has often forced stark choices between this ethic and its inversion. Manipulative and extremely individualistic, this contrary ethic does not hesitate to reduce truth and others to mere objects of power in the pursuit of narrow self-interest. Traditionally, the antithesis of the ideal *okimaw* (“leader” or “elder”) is the person who is so power-hungry that he or she transforms into a cannibal *wihtiko* (windigo).¹² These themes were central to my doctoral thesis in Indigenous intellectual, cultural and religious history, which studied the *wihtiko* concept as a photographic negative of Cree philosophical anthropology and ethics, tracing their evolution over time in relation to Newcomer influences, actions, ideas and ideals. What I discovered in Native and Newcomer encounters with the *wihtiko* and each other was not radical cultural difference but profound common ground “on the edge of humanity.” Even amidst conflict and misunderstanding, even if expressed in different ways across cultural time or space, there was a shared conviction that reducing truth or others to mere objects, in quests or contests for power, was to risk losing one’s humanity.¹³

Wihtiko possession or transformation may be almost unheard of today, but this extreme negation of Cree leadership principles and ideals remains a metaphor and guidepost for critiquing failures to adhere to the ethic of reciprocity. To state it more positively, Cree leadership principles and ideals remain foundational to the success of one of the strongest Indigenous nations in Canada: the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee (of present-day Quebec). These principles and ideals also resonate powerfully for the Mushkegowuk (of present-day Ontario), even if a different treaty relationship, history and context have sometimes created greater external and internal obstacles to their implementation in contemporary social, political and economic structures.

The Moose Factory YMCA Leaders Corps appears to represent another powerful example of common ground and interrelationship that epitomizes an ethic of reciprocity and transcends the kinds of divisions outlined above. This leadership program, entirely volunteer-driven, was founded in 1967 as an extension of the Midland YMCA. Although it ran primarily in Moose Factory, it also had participants from Moosonee and, through the local residential school, other James Bay communities. A branch was also run in Fort George (present-day Chisasibi, Quebec) in the early 1970s. The person who defined the ethos of the program through the majority of its first fifty years was John Delaney.¹⁴ “Mr. D” as so many of us came to call him, arrived in Moose Factory in the late 1960s as an 18-year-old Indian Residential/Day School teacher and eventually retired from the provincial public school system. He married Grace Visitor, a Cree woman who also strongly influenced the program and remains a recognized leader in her own right. With the exception of a few years in Fort George, they lived together in Moose Factory until John’s passing in 2005. The eldest of their three children, Christina Linklater, still runs the program. The structure remains relatively simple: John and Christina have recruited and trained young people as coaches in sports programs, putting them in positions of leadership and responsibility where they serve and mentor younger children. If the impact has been profound, however, it is due to a core emphasis not on athletics but on the reciprocal nature of authentic leadership: drawing out and cultivating the best in oneself and in others in order to serve each other.

Further research is needed to fully understand, contextualize and critically assess the principles, examples and legacies that define this program, its founders and leaders, and those who have shaped it with their participation. Nevertheless, the immediate evidence suggests a profound impact. Today, decades after participating in this program, the Director General of the Cree School Board of Quebec, Abraham Jolly, still refers to John Delaney as a model teacher in his talks to Cree School Board teachers.¹⁵ Irene Tomatuk, the Executive Director of Omushkego Education, the regional equivalent for Ontario, is also a former leader in the program. So too is Heather Moore, Executive Director of the Moose Cree Education Authority. Most significantly, at the request of the youth themselves, Moose Cree First Nation has established a John R. Delaney Youth Centre.¹⁶

As an alumnus of the Moose Factory YMCA Leaders Corps, and former President (1992-93), I am well placed to undertake this research project in close consultation with the indispensable collaborators on whom its success would depend. Over the years, I have had frequent conversations with John's family, with whom I am very close, as well as other current and former Leaders Corps members. There is a growing and widely shared sense that this history has to be better understood and shared not only for the benefit of the local and regional communities but also for others across Canada and beyond. Since John's passing, I have been waiting for the right circumstances to pursue this work. The passage of time has helped create a sufficiently detached perspective. I have also acquired additional professional, academic and volunteer experience in Indigenous/non-Indigenous history, relations, reconciliation, leadership and community development, all from an intentionally wide range of positions and perspectives. My doctoral thesis provides a solid foundation for the main focus of my work: to bring Cree, Indigenous, Western and other cultures into deep conversation about what it means to be human, and to anchor this conversation not just in abstract ideas but also in their emergence, transformation and encounter in the unfolding histories of specific cultures. My proposed research flows out of this, and I am keen to make it the focus of my next major research undertaking.

Building off my doctoral research, I would begin with a preliminary study of traditional Cree leadership principles and examples as revealed in Cree oral tradition and other historical sources. I would also briefly review the history of the YMCA and its other cross-cultural programs. Working with John's family and other key collaborators, I would then trace the history of the Moose Factory YMCA and the biographies of core leaders and participants. I would emphasize the first forty years (1967-2007) but would not exclude the more recent period. Primary sources would include existing written and audio-visual records as well as new oral history interviews. A full picture would eventually require a second and wider round of interviews, but in the interim, I would start comparing the leadership principles and examples found in this program, as well as its ethic of reciprocity, with those found in the traditional Cree context. I would set this comparative study within a broader history of regional intercultural relations, and Cree leadership development and education, from traditional contexts through residential schools to the unfolding resurgence and renewal of Indigenous control of Indigenous education.¹⁷ Finally, I would begin to relate the points arising from this comparative study to more global questions, starting with those questions and themes that are critical to envisioning reconciliation in a Canadian context. These include: self-governance, good government and leadership, Indigenous rights, reciprocity, reconciliation, resurgence, interculturality, as well as other questions specific to ethics, political philosophy, philosophical anthropology and cultural anthropology.

This project would bring abstract ideas – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – into dialogue with historical experience, best practices and concrete policy options. This is why it is best situated within an institution like Concordia University's School of Community and Public Affairs (SCPA). Directed by Chedly Belkhodja, whose work on migration, integration and inclusion would provide an important comparative reference point, this school is ideal not just for its community and public affairs focus. More importantly, it houses Quebec's first and only full degree program in First Peoples Studies (FPST), co-founded by my proposed post-doctoral supervisor, Daniel Salée. This program, where I teach part-time as an adjunct faculty member, would facilitate critical conversations and interactions

with students from Indigenous and other communities. Professor Salée would bring an ideal mix of public policy and Indigenous research expertise, including current work on Indigenous political philosophy; he is also a member of DIALOG: A Research and Knowledge Network Relating to Aboriginal Peoples, a Quebec-wide network headquartered at the Institut national de la recherche scientifique (IRNS) in Montreal. This city is home to four universities that have Indigenous scholars and research expertise. Among them, however, Concordia stands out as the university with the highest number of Indigenous research chairs in the world, and it is about to appoint a university-wide coordinator for Indigenous research. Equally relevant for this project, Concordia University was created out of a 1974 merger of Loyola College with Sir George Williams University, which was established by the YMCA and named after its founder. Montreal, in fact, is where the first YMCA was established in North America. Concordia and Montreal are thus ideal locations with important historical sources for exploring the ethos of the YMCA leadership model that was brought to Moose Factory in the 1960s. Montreal is also home to many Indigenous people and institutions, including a Cree School Board office and many James Bay Cree leaders, elders, professionals and students. Finally, it is a short distance from Ottawa, with its federal, Cree and national Indigenous organization offices as well as relevant archives, policy makers and scholars, some of them interested in collaborating on this project.

A more extensive subsequent research partnership project is envisaged that would expand on this proposed post-doctoral research. In this regard, I have already had meetings and conversations with Cree educators, former YMCA Leaders Corps members, Cree film-maker Victor Linklater, and established scholars like Caroline Andrew, who wish to collaborate on this initiative. I would work in close conversation with them for this project, with the goal of developing a second and larger research phase, as soon as I am in a position to apply for the funding necessary to undertake it. In this regard, we envisage multiple collaborators and multiple outcomes, including academic articles, policy papers, curriculum and program development, community workshops, symposia and a conference, as well as scholarly and public histories of the YMCA program and Cree leadership using diverse media.

John Ralston Saul has argued for reconceiving Canada as a “people of Aboriginal inspiration ... a Métis civilization.” His vision, however, seems entangled in “White Man’s guilt.” “When I dig around in the roots of how we imagine ourselves,” he writes, “how we govern, how we live together in communities – how we treat one another when we are not being stupid – what I find is deeply Aboriginal.”¹⁸ If Canadians are Métis, what heritage are they drawing from when they *are* “being stupid”? As is too often the case, the possibility seems left out that *métissage* or interculturality may involve creative discovery and re-articulation of deeply shared ideals – enriched by diverse experiences of the challenges of living up to them. Instead, emphasis is placed on the creation of something new from very different cultural sources, in which traditions and the past rarely have positive connotations on both sides of the equation. In other equally problematic interpretations, Indigenous cultures are too easily reduced to “victim,” “survivor” or “resister” status, where they are used to critique an amorphous “hegemonic” Western culture. Alternatively, positive or negative stereotypes of Indigenous cultures are used as foils in non-Indigenous debates, often to the detriment to Indigenous people.¹⁹

Are the only lessons from the past, lessons of what went wrong or lessons of radical cultural difference and critique? Cree elder Raphael Wabano did not think so; interviewed in the early 1970s, he emphasized the need to bring together the best of southern (i.e. non-Indigenous) and northern (i.e. Cree) cultures.²⁰ This proposed research project would shed light on a fifty-year-old program founded on such intercultural reciprocity, in a region where the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations has frequently been described – by Cree and non-Cree alike – in terms of “partnership.”²¹ Sweeping summaries and assessments of the impact of 1492 too easily miss, or misconstrue, more local and regional differences, which are critical to a better understanding of our shared history. Equally importantly, they may help us envision forms of reconciliation and resurgence that are based not on suppression or (re)assertion of difference, but on drawing out and cultivating the best in ourselves and others: leadership founded on self-governance, epistemic integrity and an ethic of reciprocity.

Endnotes

- ¹ John Ermich E.D. Acton, *Lectures on Modern History* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 10.
- ² Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, vol. 6, *Canada's Residential Schools: Reconciliation* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).
- ³ Rita Joe, *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi'kmaw Poet* (Wreck Cove, NS: Cape Breton Books, 2011; first published in 1996); Marlene Brant Castellano, Linda Archibald and Mike DeGagné, eds., *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools* (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2008); J.R. Miller, *Residential Schools and Reconciliation: Canada Confronts its History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).
- ⁴ Myra Tait and Kiera Ladner, eds., *Surviving Canada: Indigenous Peoples Celebrate 150 Years of Betrayal* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2017).
- ⁵ J.R. Miller, *Residential Schools and Reconciliation: Canada Confronts its History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).
- ⁶ John S. Long, "The Politics of Education in Moose Factory, Ontario," *Actes du dix-septieme congres des algonquinistes*, ed. William Cowan, 183-207 (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1986); Cecil Chabot, "Reconciling Amerindian and Euroamerican: (Mis)Understandings of a Shared Past: Lessons for Conflict Historiography from the 1832 Hannah Bay 'Massacre'," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 30, no. 2 (2010): 239-241.
- ⁷ Chabot, "Reconciling," 241.
- ⁸ Cecil Chabot and Laurie Sutherland, eds. "Building a Future with our Shared Past: Proposal for incorporating a tri-jurisdictional association to develop our History, Culture and tradition of Hospitality," Report based on two-day community session in Moose Factory, submitted to: Moose Cree First Nation, The Corporation for the Town of Moosonee, and The MoCreebec Council of the Cree Nation, February 23, 2009.
- ⁹ Colin Scott, "Ideology of Reciprocity Between the James Bay Cree and the Whiteman State," in *Outwitting the State*, ed. Peter Skalnik, 81-108 (London: Transaction Publishers, 1989); Richard Preston, "James Bay Cree Respect Relations within the Great Community of Persons: Who Should be Killed and How," in *Nonkilling Societies*, ed. Joam Evans Pim, 286-288 (Honolulu: Center for Global Nonkilling, 2010).
- ¹⁰ Louis Bird, *The Spirit Lives in the Mind: Omushkego Stories, Lives, and Dreams*, ed. Susan Elaine Gray (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 4-5.
- ¹¹ Bird, *Spirit Lives*, 115-116.
- ¹² Chabot, "Cannibal Wihtiko: Finding Native-Newcomer Common Ground" (PhD thesis, University of Ottawa, 2016), 317-318.
- ¹³ "Legacy of caring thrives in Ontario's north: Late Midland native honoured by Cree of Moose Factory," *The Barrie Advance*, August 14, 2009, accessed September 21, 2019, <https://www.simcoe.com/community-story/1994165-legacy-of-caring-thrives-in-ontario-s-north/>.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ John S. Long, "The Politics of Education in Moose Factory, Ontario," in *Actes du dix-septieme congres des algonquinistes*, ed. William Cowan, 183-207 (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1986).
- ¹⁶ John Ralston Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* (Toronto: Penguin, 2008), xvi, 1.
- ¹⁷ Berkhofer, Robert J. Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978; Neil Diamond, dir., *Reel Injun*, DVD, Montreal: Rezolution Pictures Inc. and the National Film Board of Canada, 2009.

¹⁹ Berkhofer, Robert J. Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978; Neil Diamond, dir., *Reel Injun*, DVD, Montreal: Rezolution Pictures Inc. and the National Film Board of Canada, 2009.

²⁰ Cited in James Bay Cree Society, "Wetamakwin: 'To Inform'" (Moose Factory, Ontario: submission to the Royal Commission on the Northern Environment, April 1979), 18-19.

²¹ Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partners in Furs: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay (1670-1870)* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983). Abel Bosum, in McGill University, "Indigenous Leadership, Governance and Development: A Public Conversation with Grand Chief Abe Bosum and the Right Honourable Paul Martin," filmed November 29, 2017, YouTube video, 0:16:40, posted December 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdlqsHnxG3I>.

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