

Locating Ourselves in the Place of Creation

The Academy as *Kitsu'lt melkiko'tin*¹

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Pour écrire cet article je m'éloigne du par, du pour et à propos de nous-mêmes qui sont à la racine de notre "indiennité aimante" pour aller vers le pourquoi on a besoin d'écrire à propos de soi-même. Le but de ce texte est de clarifier le fait que comme chercheuses et étudiantes autochtones on doit produire une recherche autochtone par, pour et à propos de nous-mêmes- en vertu de nos propres principes de « bonté, de générosité, de partage et de respect » afin de réclamer une place pour nous-mêmes là où on vit, c'est-à-dire à l'université.

"Reconciliation"

We are waking up to our history
from a forced slumber
We are breathing into our lungs
so it will be a part of us again
It will make us angry at first
because we will see how much you stole from us
and for how long you watched us suffer
we will see how you see us
and how when we copied your ways
it killed our own.
We will cry and cry
because we can never be the same
But we will go home to cry
and we will see ourselves in this huge mess
and we will gently whisper the circle back
and it will be old and it will be new .

— R. Tababdong

In a previous paper I established the necessity of recognizing that Indigenous women's writing, as it is grounded in our teachings and ways of knowing, produces something that is mostly missing from so much scholarly discourse *about* Indigenous Peoples; that is, a "loving perception" of Indianess. (Baker). For the purpose of this paper, I want to shift from how writing *by, for, and about* ourselves is grounded in "loving Indianess," to why we *need* to write

about ourselves. The intent of this paper is to make clear that, as Indigenous researchers and scholars, we need to produce Indigenous research² *by, for, and about* ourselves—informed by our own principles of "kindness, caring, sharing, and respect"—to better claim a place for ourselves in the space in which we do this; namely the academy (Weber-Pillwax 80). Aboriginal theorist, James (Sàkéj) Youngblood Henderson, provides a way to better understand what I mean by "space" with the Mi'kmaq word *kitsu'lt melkiko'tin* which translates more fully to "place of creation" (257). The goal of this paper is to mindfully locate ourselves as Aboriginal scholars in this "place of creation." Specifically, to link the physical space of the academy with our hearts and minds in our production of Aboriginal scholarly discourse or as Gregory Cajete writes a "way to express your true self. "your heart and your face"(183).³

As mentioned earlier, in "Loving Indianess: Native Women's Storytelling as Survivance" (Baker), I talked about the necessity of writing from our experiences in Indigenous women's production of contemporary Indigenous critical pedagogy. This loving perception is grounded in Indigenous women writers respect for Indigenous Knowledge, teachings, empirical observations, and revelations (Castellano 2000b: 23). Writing Indigeneity from a loving perspective is also grounded in what Shawn Wilson calls "the lifelong learning and relationship that goes into it" (179).

Much of the Indigenous scholarly discourse emerging now, while still cognizant of the limits of the academic institutions in which it is created, is clearly informed by the "cultural protocols and values" of relational accountability that we get from living and being in our communities (Steinhauer). To write from within our culture isn't simply going to achieve the relational accountability that informs Aboriginal epistemology, but when we engage our teachings (and for some us who go and seek out those teachings) we better understand what is needed to guide and inform our research. As Cora Weber-Pillwax writes,

the values and principles that guide Aboriginal research can be attributed to

The interconnectedness of all living things ... our motives and intentions ... the foundations of research as lived Indigenous experience ... our theories grounded in an indigenous epistemology ... the transformative nature of research ... the sacredness and responsibility of maintaining personal and community integrity ... and the recognition of languages and cultures as living processes. (31-32)

As writers producing scholarly Indigenous discourse we also need to be mindful of the ways that the institutions in which we work (our places of creation) limits the efficacy of our research process and devalues our Indigenous Knowledge bases. As Weber-Pillwax explains, "the argument for exclusive use of institutional standards and/or forms ... to guide research has the weight of efficacy on its side: less time and money are spent if researchers accept their work is guided by one set of ethics and embedded in one culture" (79). What gets lost in this process for all scholars is that knowledge is fluid and always changing. As Weber-Pillwax suggests, it is the "effectiveness" of this type of "efficient" scholarship, in which the benefit to the community is either "ignored or not addressed" at all, that gets lost (79). The reason this is important for us as Aboriginal scholars is that much of our work gets carried out in communities that are close to our hearts. Following Weber Pillwax's argument, it is imperative that we recognize and change the ways the academy privileges the structures of research, often perceived as taking place in "hypothetical communities" with objective researchers, which in turn creates challenges for our own material and tangible relations to our own communities (80). As Leroy Little Bear says, "when jagged worldviews collide" as they often do for those of us working in the academy, it becomes clear that "objectivity is an illusion" (85).

A particular interest of this paper is to better understand how our location in the place of creation—*kitsult melkiko'tin*— defines the production of cultural and personal identity within Indigenous scholarship as it relates to our personal and the collective sovereignty of our communities. This focus has most recently come home, as it were, in my most recent incarnation as an Aboriginal postsecondary supports coordinator. In this role I am reminded time and again how imperative it is to have resources and materials which speak to the differing but similar life experiences of the Indigenous students (my children's generation) now attending our universities. I would like to say, that for emergent Indigenous scholars, the playing field has changed in that they have the privilege of working in a space that recognizes and values Indigenous Knowledge. Sadly, for the most part, I would be wrong. Wilson explains that much of what is written about us as Indigenous Peoples reflects the mainstream ideology that

knowledge is an "individual entity" and that the "researcher is an individual" who "gains" knowledge, so much so that it fails to ever really recognize us as Indigenous Peoples (179). Within the academy there is still a strong current of Aboriginalist theory written about us (Aboriginals) flowing in and out of our classrooms and minds. Mainstream research, as many Indigenous theorists contend, is still understood as ethical and valid in the academy even though the outcomes of such research rarely benefit our Aboriginal communities. Not only have Aboriginal people grown up surrounded by research about them, but they also bear witness to the outcomes of that research not benefiting themselves, their families or communities, whilst misrepresenting their identities or ignoring their most obvious needs. Marlene Brant Castellano (2004) relates her story of being a member of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples inquiry and meeting with Elders to talk about the need for Aboriginal communities to engage the research process. The Elders told her "We've been researched to death!" (97). "The workshop was not off to a promising start" Castellano goes on to say, "until an Elder who had opened the meeting spoke quietly from a corner of the room. 'If we have been researched to death,' he said, 'maybe it's time we started researching ourselves back to life'" (97). This Elder's call for an active shift in focus from being "researched" to "researching" actively compels and implicates Indigenous researchers and writers in the uptake of relationally accountable research. Indigenous scholarship needs to focus less on decolonizing the academy. We need to focus more on understanding how Indigenous Peoples are implicated as a part of this colonized space so that we can better develop our relational accountability no matter where we operate. In consideration of this, my interest becomes less about what the "mainstream" is doing and more about what we as Indigenous writers are doing and where we are doing this.

A challenge inherent in this shift in focus is addressing the need for a fuller and more accurate representation of Indigenous Knowledges in the academy while prioritizing the need for Indigenous communities to recognize the importance of their involvement in research and the production of local, critical Indigenous Knowledges. In this work I'm more closely focused on the impact of Indigenous researchers, writers, and theorists developing a pedagogy within the academy for the coming generations of Indigenous scholars. To be clear, my intent is not to suggest that by filling the academy with Indigenous scholarship we will somehow have "all the answers." While sometimes when I'm tired I would like to have all the answers (mostly) readily at hand, I am reminded by Evelyn Steinhauer, that Aboriginal epistemology doesn't necessarily have the "right answers" as a desired end point:

A topic such as the articulation of an Indigenous research methodology is new, and like myself, many Indigenous students are searching for answers. I don't

know if I can provide these answers, but what I do attempt to do is compile the works of Indigenous scholars who have written and spoken to me directly about this topic.” (69)

So, while the search for answers is meaningful it is not fully commensurate with the production of Indigenous Knowledges. Most often, gathering, talking about, writing, and sharing Indigenous Knowledge is the best way to “give voice to and legitimize the knowledge of our people” (Steinhauer 70). As Little Bear writes, “This is why we

these students.⁶ However, the point of this paper is not to discuss who or what institution addresses these needs better or worse. The point here is to better understand how Indigenous students (Indigenous Knowledge makers in the making) benefit from and need resources created by Indigenous scholars, writers, researchers, teachers, elders, and even themselves so that they can better navigate the kitsu’lt melkiko’tin.

Starting from the premise that our desire to be located in the academy is to positively contribute to the overall well-being of Indigenous Peoples in Canada means that

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engage in conversation. So I can share my experiences with you and make you understand what I am feeling. And when you respond you are doing the same with me” (85). My intent here is to forward this as the foundation of an Indigenous epistemology.

A positive, while at times frustrating, part of working in and having close relations within Indigenous communities is that we are often intimately tied to the awareness of what is needed in our communities and therefore have a personal stake in addressing and meeting these needs. This intimate knowledge comes from our worldview and relations with those around us. I have come to realize that understanding this worldview is a lifelong process. As Henderson suggests, the difficulty for most Indigenous people working in the academy is that you have to learn yet another “world-view” and “this is a lifetime project that requires time and patience” (261).

Fifteen years ago, as an undergraduate student, I didn’t meet many other Indigenous students in the university I attended. Talking with Indigenous graduates from other universities, I learned that I wasn’t the only person who ate lunch in my car. Eight years ago, the university where I started my graduate work did not have an Indigenous scholar to supervise and guide my research. Today, while some of that is changing it is not changing fast enough to meet the increasing need. Recent trends in increased Aboriginal high school achievement and enrollment in postsecondary programs (though still below the national average for non-Aboriginal students⁴) means that more and more Indigenous youth are completing high school and entering postsecondary than in previous generations⁵ (Siggner and Costa). With an increased participation in postsecondary educational programs, many institutions are now faced with an increased need for culturally relevant resources that specifically address the needs of

we need to find ways to better understand how to make the academy our kitsu’lt melkiko’tin; our place of creation. Weber-Pillwax says, “Many, if not most, Indigenous scholars engage in contemporary research for the explicit purpose of bringing benefits to their communities and their people” (78). She goes on to say “they are usually unprepared for these challenges” even though “an interest in research is one of the reasons the people associate themselves with a university” (80). My concern here is with these “challenges” that Weber-Pillwax mentions. As we are primarily talking about the location of Indigenous scholarship within academia, it is critical that we first address the difficulties of producing Indigenous scholarly discourse within the academy. For many of us this means starting by discussing our own entry into the Indigenous Knowledge field. Steinhauer relates what many Indigenous students experienced when she says, “It was not until I started the Masters Program in First Nations Education at the University of Alberta that I was exposed to the concept of Indigenous Knowledge” (70). Like Steinhauer, many of us starting out in Indigenous research felt and knew that our education left us unprepared, as it was at best partial and at worst damaging steeped in what Marie Battiste calls “cognitive imperialism—the persisting ideologies from our colonial past that remain a part of our education system. Australian Aboriginal scholar, Martin Nakata says these feelings of under-preparedness can be best attributed to the works we studied about us. Nakata says,

In studying texts that have been written about them, scholars are negotiating the representations of themselves, their ancestors and their experiences. Negotiating these texts is not simply an intellectual process. It is also an emotional journey that often involves outrage, pain, humiliation, guilt and depression. (3)

Nakata's statement begins to speak to the strange duality many Aboriginal scholars in mainstream academies experience when faced with a reading about them selves that they feel is somehow wrong. This is what Leroy Little Bear calls "jagged world-views colliding." Gregory Cajete calls "ping geh heh" or "split-mind" and Patricia Monture-Angus calls, "contradictions." Each author is referring to their location, as Indigenous scholars, in the academy (the place of creation) as an often painful duality of simultaneously positive and negative experiences.

Writing as Solution of the "Split Mind: *Ping geh heh*"

Monture-Angus's paper, "Flint Woman: Surviving the Contradictions in Academia" was, and still is, a work that better allowed me to do more than just "survive" the academy. Monture-Angus's ability to "name and describe" the contradictions she was experiencing as an Aboriginal scholar in mainstream academia is a strategy that I still use today (53). Monture-Angus's writing provides a "roadmap" of survivance by explaining how to negotiate the emotional conflicts that arise as a product of working within what Cajete calls the "split-mind: *ping geh heh*" of the academy. Monture-Angus says as, "I have felt either confused or uncomfortable.... This feeling is rooted in my difference either as a woman or as an "Indian" or some combination of the above" (54). Monture-Angus named these uncomfortable and confusing experiences "contradictions," which was for her the "state of being that I often slam into headfirst and the experience leaves me overwhelmed and motionless" (54). Having the ability to identify and name what she was experiencing in the "push and pull" of academia allowed Monture-Angus to "understand my relationship with the university as a process of negotiating those contradictions" which she says was "no good solution" but "the solution I can hope to secure" (54). The pain and frustration of living the "split-mind" for many Aboriginal writers, researchers, and scholars has developed in us an urgent need to create from that contradictory space so that those coming after us can better understand it and have solutions for themselves. Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache suggest that writing, creating from this painful "split-mind" space is exactly what we need to move out of it. They say we can "see it as introducing a new set of ideas, a way of thinking and talking that pushes against existing boundaries, enlarging the space for new possibilities" (254). Like Castellano, Davis, and Lahache, I also argue that this "space for new possibilities" as it has emerged from our "split-mind" space, allows for new thoughts and ideas that would not have been able to exist before. Castellano, Davis, and Lahache conclude, "it becomes the grounds on which further discourse is generated" (254). This is *kitsu'lt melkiko'tin*; the creative place.

For many writers like Monture-Angus, Cajete, and

Leroy Little Bear, their place of creation—their *kitsu'lt melkiko'tin*—may physically be the academies in which they work, but more specifically their place of creation is located in their writing. Monture-Angus writes,

Things happen and I write them all down ... writing—talking back—is the process through which I come to terms with my pain, anger and emotions. Often only through the process of writing does the feeling of contradiction become actuated. It is real because I make it appear in bold black letters against stark white paper. Writing is the place where I have found both strength and empowerment. (55)

Years have passed and I am still energized by Monture-Angus's writing. For me and many other Aboriginal theorists, writing is a place of empowerment and strength. Our ability to imagine solutions that meet the needs of our communities and write them down is in keeping with my worldview and the possibility of making them real. This is why I write; because I've had a vision that writing ourselves into the academy benefits not only us, but the academy as well. Our writing softens the blows when our "jagged worldviews collide". It creates the space of *kitsu'lt melkiko'tin* that more fully makes visible the still present flaws of character and hidden agendas within the academy so that we can name and describe and change them. It is imperative to note that our location in the academy is not a "reclaimed" space; it is our claimed space. Our location in academia signals to me that we are still here and we have never left.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to better understand what we need as Indigenous scholars working in the academy. As Marie Battiste says, what we "Aboriginal people" "need" is "a new story" and "ultimately this new story is about empowering Indigenous worldviews, languages, knowledges, cultures, and most important, Indigenous peoples and communities" (viii). We need to write from our hearts and minds as Indigenous writers, because our youth, our contemporaries, and our Elders need to see themselves in the loving light our words cast.⁷ We need to write about what it's like to be Indigenous in the here and now so that those who follow us are able to see themselves better reflected back to them when they enter the academy. This is the real issue. Our young people are entering the academy in droves. They are seeking out for themselves what it means to be Indigenous and an academic. We need to be there because the academy is slow to change. When the academy isn't ready to be relationally accountable, then Indigenous scholars need to provide that balance. We need to make real those loving images and words about our Peoples so that new scholars too can believe that the Indigenous Knowledges they hold will carry them into

the future. Our youth are the keepers of our knowledge and they will be the ones to write about us in the years to come. Lighting their way is our path to becoming sovereign peoples.

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¹Mi'kmaq word for "space" or "place of creation" (Henderson).

²Marlene Brant Castellano (2004) defines "Aboriginal research" as a "research that touches the life and well-being of Aboriginal Peoples. It may involve Aboriginal Peoples and their communities directly. It may assemble data that describes or claims to describe Aboriginal Peoples and their heritage. Or, it may affect the human and natural environment in which Aboriginal Peoples live" (99).

³See Willie Ermine's "Aboriginal Epistemology" for a clearer understanding of the ways we need to link our hearts and minds to the process of Indigenous knowledge creation.

⁴See Siggner and Costa's *Overview of Educations Conditions of Urban Aboriginal Populations in Canada*. The 2001 statistics show that urban Aboriginal youth university and college degree attainment is significantly less than urban non-Aboriginal students, yet higher than reserve youth attainment.

⁵The importance of accessibility and participation for these students will only grow in the next six years (2011), when the Aboriginal 20 to 24 age group is expected to peak.

⁶The gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participation rates is often attributed to a variety of barriers that are unique to this population group. While the specific barriers vary greatly, it has been recognized that in order to effectively address access, each barrier must be addressed comprehensively. Specific barriers have been listed to include: the impact of the Residential School system, the assimilative nature of post-secondary education, lack of academic preparation, social discrimination, unemployment and poverty, cultural differences faced by Aboriginal students at post-secondary institutions, and family and personal barriers specific to Aboriginal students" ("Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance and McMaster Student Union).

⁷Monture-Angus states, "Encouraging positive self-images must be a fundamental building block on which Aboriginal inspirations are built into the education system" (78).

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