XWÉLMEXW HAKW'ELES: "REMEMBERING OURSELVES": USING AN INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY TO UNDERSTAND INDIGENOUS LAWS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Through an Indigenous research methodology, this paper shares Indigenous laws, legal orders and governing principles. It is about engaging with "lived" research and processes of decolonization to learn from *Xwélmexw*[1] epistemology and ontology. It is grounded in the teachings of *Xexá:ls*[2] and is thereby inextricably linked to *Xwélmexw* territory. Through the teachings of *Xexá:ls*, I discovered *Xwélmexw* laws that speak to the power of place, the importance of women, and the title to territory embedded within our *sxwōxwiyám*[3] and ancestral names.

Keywords*:* Indigenous laws, Legal orders and governance, Self-determination, Indigenous research methodology

Résumé

À partir d'une méthodologie de recherche autochtone, cet article présente des lois, des ordres juridiques et des principes de gouvernance autochtones. Il s'intéresse à une recherche « vécue » ainsi qu'aux processus de décolonisation afin d'apprendre à partir de l'épistémologie et de l'ontologie *Xwélmexw*[1]. L'étude s'ancre dans les enseignements de *Xexá:ls*[2] et demeure ainsi inextrablement liée au territoire *Xwélmexw*. À travers les enseignements de *Xexá:ls*, j'ai mis au jour des lois *Xwélmexw* qui témoignent du pouvoir

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[1] The People of *S'ólh Téméxw* (our land). / Le peuple de *S'ólh Téméxw* (« notre terre »).
[2] This is the concept of "Transformers" in *Halq'eméylem* (the language of the *Xwélmexw* people). / Il s'agit du concept des « Transformateurs » en Halq'eméylem (la langue du peuple Xwélmexw).
[3] This is a *Halq'eméylem* concept that can be translated as "ancient stories." / Il s'agit d'un concept *Halq'eméylem* que l'on peut traduire par « récits anciens ».

du lieu, de l'importance des femmes ainsi que du titre territorial inscrit dans nos *Sxwōxwiyám*[3] et nos noms ancestraux.

Mots-clés : lois autochtones, ordres juridiques et gouvernance, autodétermination, méthodologie de recherche autochtone.

Introduction

I began my PhD studies in 2005, knowing I wanted to study concepts of Indigenous governance and self-determination. I knew this journey would not be easy. We live after all in harsh colonial times; the Indian Act is still in effect and by its very nature subjugates and oppresses Indigenous Peoples by limiting our self-governance and empowerment. In fact, there came a point in my research journey that I considered giving up on this topic. Many of my discussions were being clouded by colonial mentalities, hindered by colonial shackles, and smothered by Indian Act indoctrinations (see Henderson Youngblood, 2000). Adding to this colonial mayhem was the fact that in most governing spaces there was a notable absence of women and the female voice (see for example Charlie, 2019; *Qwul'sih'yah'maht*, 2018; Sunseri, 2011; Voyageur, 2008, for the history and role of Indigenous women in leadership). This caused me to question my place and my role within my research and within governance and to think that maybe, as a woman, this was not the place for me. Thankfully, my decision to use an Indigenous research methodology (IRM) led to an important paradigm shift so that, despite the colonial propaganda and despite the lack of women in the room, I was able to begin to see things more clearly and understand my role as an Indigenous woman.

The more immersed I became in my research, the more confidence I gained in my ability to see and hear ancestral teachings that were applicable to contemporary challenges. Using an IRM forced me to first identify and then ground my research in Indigenous theory and Indigenous ways of knowing. This, in turn, helped me to identify principles of Indigenous governance and Indigenous laws and governing structures despite the reality of living under a colonial regime. In this paper I want to share a bit about my journey in IRM (see also Hall, 2024) and what I have come to understand so far about Indigenous governance and ways in which our own laws have contemporary relevance. As I do so, I hope that the application of such knowledge has the potential not only to strengthen community governance and tribal affiliations but ultimately to lead to the reinstatement of a unified *Xwélmexw*[4] Nation.[5]

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[4] *Xwélmexw* is the *Halq'eméylem* (the language of the *Xwélmexw* people) word for people belonging to this land (*Téméxw*), who are distinguished by our Winter Dance (Mílha) ceremonies from other nations of Peoples of this land (*Lats'o:lmexw*, meaning different people but still of this land) and distinguished from those not of this land at all, who are referred to as *Xwelítem* (starving or hungry people).

[5] I use this term "Nation" with purpose although I understand there is much confusion surrounding it. I am not referring to it as in a "Western nation-state" or as in a single First Nation community, or an Indian Act band,

Transformation as Indigenous Theory

Xexá:ls are known in english as "the Transformers" and are the four offspring of Red-Headed Woodpecker and Black Bear (McHalsie, 2007). *Sxwōxwiyám,* which are our ancient stories, tell us that Red-Headed Woodpecker had a second wife, Grizzly Bear, who became upset with Black Bear and killed her and then went after her four children. The four siblings, three boys and one girl, ran away to escape the wrath of Grizzly Bear and, over the course of their travels, set the world right. *Stó:lō* oral tradition teaches us about *Xexá:ls*:

> In the beginning the world was not quite right. Animals and people could speak to one another and change forms. The mountain goats could shed their coats and assume human form. Humans, animals and birds could all speak to each other. The world was not as we know it today and was very chaotic. Through the travels of Xexá:ls and their powers to transform, the world was made as we know it today. (Carlson et al., 2001, p. 6)

As a result of these travels and transformations by *Xexá:ls*, *S'ólh Téméxw*[6] is today rich with hundreds and hundreds of *sxwōxwiyám* spread throughout our territory.[7] *Xwelixweltel* (Steven Point, *Stó:lō Siyá:m* and the first *Stó:lō* citizen to obtain a Western law degree) tells us that the transformation sites and *sxwōxwiyám* are in fact our "written" constitution; that is, our laws are "written" in stone throughout our territory (Carlson et al., 2001).

As I was struggling with my research, questioning my position as a woman within it, and quite frankly running out of energy to continue, I had a dream about *Xexá:ls.*[8] The next day I wrote the following:

> Today the world is still not right. The colonizing process has had a devastating impact upon the people. People no longer care about the animals, plants, trees, water, air and mother earth is viewed as inherently rapable.[9] Many Indigenous people no longer speak our own languages, or know where we belong and from whom we come. Indigenous teachings and values are being ignored. The world today is not as we knew it and is very chaotic. Through Xexá:ls and the power of transformation the world will be returned to all my relations. (Victor (now Hall), 2012, p. 34)[10]

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but, rather, as a pre-colonized grouping of an Indigenous People who share a language(s), a culture, a worldview, territory, history, spirituality, and kinship and ancestral ties.

[6] This is the *Halq'eméylem* term for our world, which embodies past, present, future, intangible, and tangible elements of life (see for example Gardner, 2002).

[7] See footnote four for how the *Xwélmexw* People, and therefore our territory would be defined according to our shared spiritual beliefs in the Mílha (Winter Dance). The *Stó:lō* are accordingly a subset of a larger grouping belonging to *Xwélmexw* territory.

[8] Thankfully, I had the courage to include my dreams as a valid source of knowledge, the relevance of which is confirmed by Archibald (2008) and Kovach (2009, 2021).

[9] This is a term used by Andrea Smith (2008).

[10] Note on name change, I changed my last name from Victor to Hall in 2015.

My dream and this understanding created a major and timely paradigm shift in how I was relating to my research; this contemporary relevance of *Xexá:ls* put the spirit back into what I was doing and gave me direction in how to continue. If *Xexá:ls* could travel through and set things straight once, who is to say they cannot do so a second or third or however many times it takes?

Everything started to make sense to me, and the contemporary relevance of *Xexá:ls* and our ontology of the power of transformations became central tenets for my research. It was no longer enough to try to fit what I was doing into a qualitative research methodology—in fact, I openly rebelled against it. I was tired of trying to fit my (our) world into something to which others could relate. An IRM is not a subset of qualitative research methods, and as I was a member of the community, referring to it as "participatory action research" felt paternalistic and objectificationist. An IRM is its own discipline, its own school of thought, and therefore worthy of nothing less than its own foundations and theories (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Simpson, 2011; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008).

Next, I had to work at decolonizing my mindset and thoughts in order to identify Indigenous theories as "theories." For example, at the time, the only Indigenous theory I could relate to was Taiaiake Alfred's Indigenous Resurgence theory (2005). Yet, for some reason, referring to *Xexá:ls* as a "theory" felt almost sacrilegious. I had to "Indigenize" my definition of "theory" in relation to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. According to scientists, theory is not just a guess or hunch; a theory is "a well-substantiated explanation of an aspect of the natural world that can incorporate laws, hypotheses and facts."[11] Indigenous resurgence in turn requires what Alfred refers to as "self-conscious traditionalism," which results in the "selective re-adoption of traditional values" and principles (1999, p. 81). *Stó:lō* values and principles are embedded within the travels of *Xexá:ls* as shared through *sxwōxwiyám*. The concept of *Xexá:ls* is therefore an Indigenous theory of Transformation! And these Indigenous theories and others are well substantiated not only within our oral teachings, but also now within a growing body of academic literature being produced by Indigenous scholars using an IRM (see Kovack, 2021, for a comprehensive analysis, which includes over a dozen unpublished theses by Indigenous scholars).

Story as Science

Indigenous Resurgence and Transformation as theories call for action, some kind of movement, and—more importantly—that we do not anchor our stories within the rhetoric of a colonial reality (Simpson, 2011). In this movement of resurgence and transformation, it becomes imperative that colonization not be the only story of our lives: "It must be recognized that colonialism is a narrative in which the Settler's power is the fundamental reference and

[11] See for example American Museum of Natural History https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/darwin/evolution-today/what-is-a-theory

assumption, inherently limiting Indigenous freedom and imposing a view of the world that is but an outcome or perspective of that power" (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 601). To avoid replicating or becoming complacent with the colonial regime and further assimilating, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that Indigenous Theories are not only *sui generis*, but inextricably linked to the land (Simpson, 2011) and Indigenous Philosophies and Values (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Simpson, 2011; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008). They cannot be separated.

By fully immersing myself in Indigenous ways of knowing, I was able to clearly see how the concept of *Xexá:ls* is, in fact, my theory. And, if *Xexá:ls* comprise my theory, *sxwōxwiyám* are my "ways of knowing" or my epistemology. This called for another paradigm shift in how I viewed "stories." The concept of story as a way of knowing, as a science, is an old way of knowing that was completely new to me. In her book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Mind, Heart, Body and Spirit*, *Q'um Q'um Xiiem* Dr. Joanne Archibald (2008) shares the power of working with story and the protocols to be followed. *Q'um Q'um Xiiem* coined the term "storywork" to help us fully engage in this methodology, in this Indigenous way of knowing. She gave me the language I needed to explain the power of story and the confidence to centre it as a valid, reliable, and credible way of coming to understand my world.

Once these paradigm shifts were made and I was able to decolonize my mind, body, and spirit, I was completely immersed in my research. My theory, my ontology, and my epistemology were all firmly rooted within a *Xwélmexw* worldview. What I was doing felt real, valid, and reliable. Above all, it was authentic. It honoured my (our) ancestors, our worldview, and the importance of *S'ólh Téméxw*.

***All My Relations* and *Doing Things in a Good Way* as Legal Traditions**

For me, an IRM meant an almost complete immersion into *Stó:lō* ways of knowing and believing. As a result, I came to see that "all my relations" is not just a saying, it is a legal tradition. It is a law of this land. Abiding by it, for me, means acknowledging our inter-relatedness and the inter-connections between all living beings: that is, not just between humans, but all things that possess *shxwelí* or a life force.

And the english word "good" became something more than an english judgment: it no longer had anything to do with the dichotomy of "good" and "bad." It became a feeling. I have lost count of how many times I hear the phrase "we need to learn to do things in a good way."[12] Doing things in a good way is applied to every *Stó:lō* interaction, every *Stó:lō* event, every *Stó:lō* gathering—absolutely everything the *Stó:lō* do, we are encouraged to do it in a "good way." This is a legal tradition (Palys & Victor (now Hall), 2007; Victor (now Hall), 2006).

What I was experiencing was/is what Borrows refers to as Indigenous Natural Laws (Borrows, 2010). How do you know when you have done something in a "good way?" You can

[12] Especially from my Uncle Herb Joe (*T'xwelatse*).

feel it. How does a "feeling" become a legal tradition? By remembering who we are and our place on this earth, we quickly remember how important "good feeling" is to absolutely everything we do. When we remember the importance of relationships (Victor (now Hall), 2001) with self, with others, and with our environment, it quickly makes sense.

Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing have been here since time immemorial (i.e., thousands of years). Indigenous thinkers have ensured we survived floods, massive sheets of ice, landslides, earthquakes, and famines, and I am confident their wisdom will certainly ensure we survive this onslaught of colonialism.

***Stó:lō* Laws, Governing Structure, and Principles**

One of the biggest challenges in re-centreing, re-covering, re-claiming, re-vitalizing, and re-membering (Abosolon & Willet, 2005) *Xwélmexw* knowledge is that I had to do it using the english language. Therefore, as shown in the examples provided above, I found my colonial mindset being challenged again and again. For example, one cannot help thinking about a "governing structure" in terms of massive parliamentary buildings and imposing courtrooms. When I set out into *S'ólh Téméxw* in search of governing structures, of course, I found none of these things. However, the early colonizers who upon arriving on Turtle Island and finding no police, jails, prisons, or prison guards were wrong when they made the self-serving colonial leap that we had no laws or legal traditions on this land (Yazzie, 2005). They could not have been more wrong, of course. I certainly did not want to make the same mistake. I had to rethink my notion of "structure" as not just the Western concept of a building or a courtroom, but something that provides parameters around something else, a place where principles and laws are being practised and fine-tuned.

What the newcomers failed to recognize is that we do, in fact, have a rather massive governing structure: our land. And while we may not have a complex court system, we do have an even more complex system(s) of ceremony(s). Just as Western laws are upheld in Western courtrooms, our Indigenous laws are upheld through our sacred ceremonies.

***Syuwá:lelh*[13] (*Stó:lō* Laws)**

And just as governing structures and principles look different in *Xwélmexw* territory than in Western societies, so too do our laws. That we are of an oral history and tradition is widely recognized (see for example Archibald, 2008; Burrows, 2010; Gill, 2009; *Qwul'sih'yah'maht*, 2005, 2018), but what this means exactly still needs further understanding and

[13] I was able to recognize the importance of this word after speaking with Mr. Tom Sampson (*ƫᶿesalaq*) a fluent SENĆOŦEN and *Hul'qumi'num* speaker who taught me what *snowoyelh* means (it is the *Hun'qumi'num*, or downriver, spelling for s*yuwá:lelh*, which is the *Halq'eméylem*, or upriver, version of the word (personal visit March 30 2010 and as cited in Author, 2012,p. 61)

acknowledgement. To expect law books would be absurd and highly eurocentric. Rather, our laws are found in our *syuwá:lelh*,[14] which translates into english as "words from our ancestors." Here, for example, are a few of the *Stó:lō* laws that appear in the *Stó:lō Heritage Policy Manual* (2003):

"*Eykws hakw'elestset, te:wes te siyólexwalh*"
(It is good to remember the Teachings of our Ancestors)
"*Xaxastexw te mekw'stam*"
(Respect all things)
"*Ewe chexw qelqelit te mekw'stam loy qw' esli hokwex yexw lamexw ku:t*"
(Don't waste, ruin, destroy everything, only take what you need)
"*S'ólh Téméxw te ikw'elo. Xolhmet te mekw'stam it kwelat*"
(This is our land, and we have to take care of everything that belongs to us)

These laws, along with others, are practised and evident during all our sacred ceremonies. Where else might they be useful? Should they not be applied outside of ceremony as well? And do just *Xwélmexw* people abide by them? What about *Lats'o:lmexw*[15] and *Xwelítem*[16] living within our territory? What about when *Xwélmexw* who live in another territory: do they carry these laws with them? These are important questions that require further exploration and understanding.[17]

Perhaps even more important, given imminent environmental concerns, what about their applicability to industry and governments? If these are the laws of the land, should industries and governments (including First Nations governments) be required not to merely cite them or make reference to them, but to abide by them? What a different situation we would find ourselves in if this were the case. For example, for thousands of years under *Stó:lō* laws, the *Stó:lō* managed the river and the fish within the river. Under *Stó:lō* laws there was more than enough for everyone, and we could literally drink the water straight out of the river. Our laws meant we respected the river and everything connected to it; our laws ensured we fished for only what we needed, and we abided by several different salmon treaties and protocols with neighbouring *Lats'o:lmexw*, thus ensuring there was enough for everyone.

In comparison, within fifty years of living under the Canadian government's Department of Fisheries and Oceans' (DFO's) management regime (from the late 1880s to the early 1930s), salmon runs were decimated, and the sturgeon, along with other species, were fished to near extinction. And despite the DFO's horrendous track record, it continues today to unilaterally impose its immature and poorly thought-out management regime onto First Nations Peoples and communities. The DFO not only ignores *Stó:lō* laws, it forces the *Stó:lō* to do so as well, or face

[14] See also Sarah Morales's unpublished doctoral dissertation (2014): *Snuw'uyulh: Fostering an Understanding of the Hul'qumi'num Legal Tradition*.
[15] See footnote 4.
[16] See footnote 4.
[17] Thank you to Sarah Hunt for bringing these and other questions regarding the geography of law and the mobility of legal principles to my attention.

criminal charges.[18] Instead of fishing for what we need (*Stó:lō* law), we fish for what we can get (DFO law).

In fact, the millions of non-Indigenous people who have financially gained from this billion-dollar “industry” have never thanked, let alone compensated, all the First Nations who harvested, grew, and multiplied the salmon stocks for thousands and thousands of years before colonization. The harsh colonial reality is such that today very few Indigenous people benefit, economically or otherwise, from our salmon, yet we are blamed as soon as fish stocks are in danger. This blame, and often outright hostility, is directed at First Nations despite the fact that we account for less than 5% of the total catch and lack jurisdiction, let alone decision-making power over one of our most precious resources, our salmon.

Sxwōxwiyám and Good Governing Principles

While our Indigenous laws are being upheld through our sacred ceremonies, I advocate they be upheld in all aspects of everyday life. So, where might we find our governing principles that guide these laws? When we think about governing principles, we think of Western philosophers, legal scholars and traditions, criminal code books, and law libraries. Again, I found none of this in *S’ólh Téméxw*. Instead, I found stories and again had to challenge my Western mindset and decolonize my thoughts about “story.” If “storywork” is our science (Archibald, 2008) our way of knowing, then of course our ancestors are going to “write” our principles in “story.” For example, I have listed here five *sxwōxwiyám* from hundreds from which we can draw governing principles.

Sxwōxwiyám Governing Principles

Transformation	*Sxwoxwiyam* summary	Teaching/laws
Hatzic Rock, *Xaytem* Transformation Rock Located in Mission, BC	Three *Stó:lō Sí:yá:m* had the gift of writing and were asked to write the *Halq’eméylem* language down. But they did not do as asked and were transformed into stone.	Everyone has a responsibility to share his/her gift with the people.

[18] Despite fishing being a constitutionally protected right under Section 35 of the Charter (see *R v. Sparrow*, 1990), the *Stó:lō*, as other First Nations, continue to be charged under Section 33 of the Federal Fisheries Act when exercising this right outside of DFO regulations (see for example *R v. Kelly*, 2013, and Chapter 8, Author, 2012).

Llílheqi, Mt. Cheam Located in Agassiz, BC	There was a *Stó:lō* woman who cared about her people so much that she was transformed into a mountain so she could forever watch over the people, our salmon, and our river.	(1) Importance and prevalence of women as central to the well-being of the people, the fish, and the river; (2) territory identification and inter-tribal relations; and (3) roles and responsibilities of women and our decision-making power.
Stone *T'xwelátse*, 600 lb granite stone currently located at the *Stó:lō* Research and Resource Management Centre	A man was transformed into stone for mistreating his wife.	1) Women are caretakers even of those who harm others; 2) importance of doing things in a good way; 3) You cannot govern if you do not have a relationship with those (including resources) that you govern; and 4) Respect your wife.
Xelhálh – Fraser River near Lady Franklin Rock	There was an injured person; a woman who did not share her first catch of salmon with the people was transformed to stone.	The importance of sharing
Tamiho:y – mountain in *Ts'elxwéyeqw* territory	The "Sleeping Chief" has male and female body parts.	1) Man and woman co-exist in one entity; and 2) Man and woman are both needed for balance.

***Llílheqi* as Family Law**

Naturally, being a young adult, I am still in process of learning all that these *sxwōxwiyám* have to teach in relation to good governance and self-determination. Since completing my dissertation, I have been focusing on *Llílheqi* for several reasons. *Llílheqi*[19] was a *Stó:lō* woman who married a man named *Kwelxá:lxw* from what is now known as Washington State and moved to live with him in his territory. Some say she moved back home because she became lonely for her people; others say she moved back home because *Kwelxá:lxw* took a second wife. Whatever the reason, we know she had the autonomy and the right to move back home, which she did. Her three daughters, her three sisters, and her dog came with her. As the story goes, she lived out her life doing what she loved to do—looking after her people, the river, and the salmon—until one

[19] I am not a storyteller, so what follows is a simple rendition of this *sxwōxwiyám* so the reader can understand how I extrapolate governing principles from this story.

day she became too old to carry out her work. *Xexá:ls* happened upon her one day as she was crying and asked her why she cried. She explained she had become too old to do her work, and so *Xexá:ls* transformed her into a mountain so she could always and forever be able to look after her people, the river, and the salmon. Today, she is known in english as Mt. Cheam, and her husband is known as Mt. Baker.

Her story has much to teach us in relation to many aspects of *Stó:lō* life. However, to me, she is central not only as a governing structure but as a central source of several governing principles. Her story teaches us not only how to relate to each other and our resources, but also about family law, and the role of women in the caretaking and decision-making process: she serves as the boundary keeper for *Stó:lō* territory. If *Xexá:ls* transformed her into a mountain so she could always look after her people, then her territory will be defined by "as far as the eye can see"[20] when the viewer is at her peak. That with her are her three daughters and three sisters tell us women play a central role (see also *Qwul'sih'yah'maht*, 2018) to the *Stó:lō* people (her three sons stayed with their father). The *sxwōxwiyám* goes on to tell us that *Llílheqi* also had a half-sister named *Simimkw'* who it is said *Llílheqi* threw rocks at when she claimed to be a full sister. This teaches us the importance of knowing one's ancestry.

In stark contrast, the Indian Act dictates the complete opposite of every guiding principle provided by *Llílheqi*. Up until 1982, for example, when a Status woman married a First Nations man from another community, she was automatically registered to his community—no questions were asked, and certainly the woman's wishes and her role and responsibilities within her home community were not taken into consideration. As a result, many communities were deprived of important cultural property and ceremony as future matriarchs were displaced to their husband's community, where such knowledge and ceremony often became obsolete or no longer relevant, as it belonged to another territory.

As noted by *Llilheqi*'s response when her half-sister claimed to be a full sister, knowing one's ancestry is important. Under the Indian Act, ancestry has nothing to do with how membership is determined. In terms of marital breakdown, *Llílheqi* was readily and easily accepted back into her own community and resumed her roles and responsibilities with her own people. Unlike so many present-day situations, living away from her husband did not result in her living in poverty. This contrasts starkly with the Indian Act's complete inability to protect, never mind provide for, women whose marriage results in separation or divorce.

The issue of matrimonial property on reserve remained a literal no-man's land for well over twenty years *after* Section 15 of the Charter guaranteed equal rights to men and women. This, despite the fact that Section 15 of the Charter, which now guarantees equality "before" and "under" the law, was influenced by the seventy-year legal battle of Indigenous women (see Lee

[20] Dalton Silver from *Semath* shared this concept with me and told me there is a *Halq'eméylem* word that means "as far as the eye can see."

Maracle, 1996; Rose Charlie, 2019; Montour, 2021;[21] Monture-Angus, 1999; *Canada (AG) v. Lavell*, 1974; *Sandra Lovelace v. Canada*, 1977–1981).

Colonial Impacts and Challenges

If we have such a depth, breadth, and wealth of Indigenous good governance, principles, and laws, why are we not abiding by them? Why are we not making use of them? A simple answer is this: it's due to colonialism, which includes the now firmly embedded colonial relationship of "assumed" Euro-Canadian superiority and jurisdiction, the indoctrination of colonial ideologies such as eurocentrism, acceptable racism,[22] and collective amnesia (Henderson Youngblood, 2000). A more complicated answer may be in order when we consider that today it is by choice that First Nations continue to operate under colonial laws and ideologies. It is by choice that we enter into extermination agreements such as those offered by the present-day British Columbia Treaty Commission (BCTC). It is by choice that we continue to elect our leadership under the jurisdiction of the Indian Act. Have we bought into the colonial myth that we have lost too much of our own ways and knowledge? Have we bought into the colonial myth that our ways are inferior, backward, or no longer relevant? Or are we being led by leaders who now abide by colonial policies and their twin brother, capitalism? Either way, we can no longer simply blame colonialism: we have to look at the ways in which we are choosing not to assert our autonomy and not to use our agency to effect change. I am in no way relieving the colonial governments and settler societies from their responsibilities not only to reconcile with Indigenous Peoples, but to compensate for the colonial harms committed against Indigenous Peoples. However, I am tired of us waiting for someone else to do something. We have to take the lead on this: not only are we morally, ethically, and inherently responsible for doing so, but we have history, laws, legislation, an international arena, great leadership, and the truth all on our side.

Contemporary Challenges Facing Indigenous Leadership

The *Stó:lō*, as with other Nations across this country, have great leaders who are ready to dismantle the colonial relationship and all of its false pretenses and illegitimate claims. We, like so many other Indigenous Nations across this country, have strong leaders who are ready to reinstate our Indigenous sovereignty—not only over our land and resources, but over our relatives and especially our future and most precious resource: our children.

During my dissertation research, I spoke with several *Stó:lō Sí:yá:m*, whom I have come to refer to as my dissertation teachers. These include Joe Hall, Otis Jasper, Margaret

[21] See the documentary on Mary Two-Axe Earley's life at https://www.nfb.ca/film/mary-two-axe-earley/.

[22] And what I refer to as inter-generational racism.

Commodore, Ken Malloway, Patricia Kelly, June Quipp, and Charles Douglas, along with our local archaeologist, Dr. Dave Schaepe, Elder Tom Sampson, and former Assembly of First Nations national chief Ovide Mercredi. From my dissertation teachers I was able to begin to understand challenges that our contemporary leaders must contend with that many, if not all, of our pre-contact *Sí:yá:m* did not. For example, contemporary Indigenous leaders must contend with: (1) Indian Act dependency and dysfunction; (2) undefined roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the political process; (3) overt and covert economic racism; and (4) an almost complete lack of meaningful organization, which compounds all of the other issues (Victor (now Hall), 2012).

Added to this is the habit of conflating Indigenous diversity for the sake of colonial rule and management. For the *Stó:lō*, for example, our diversity has been conflated in two major areas. First, our multiple *Sí:yá:m* roles have been conflated into a singular "chief" role, and second, our "tribal affiliations" have been conflated into Indian Act "bands." Both conflations work to assist with (1) the continued land appropriation and the extinguishment of rights and title via the reserve system and the BCTC process, and (2) the extinction of a People via "membership lists" and a "status" system that has become completely asinine in its ability to decide who belongs, when one belongs, where one belongs, for how long one belongs, and, most importantly, completely leaves out the part about "why" you belong (Victor (now Hall), 2012).

Also from my dissertation teachers, I learned that while our leaders are contending with these leadership challenges, they also contend with the following colonial impacts (Victor (now Hall), 2012):

1) the **displacement** of *Stó:lō the Sí:le* (matriarchs);
2) the **division** and/or **creation** of male "chiefs";
3) the **illegal theft** of *Stó:lō* lands;
4) the **residential school** system; and
5) the **anti-potlatch law**.

While we are slowly and painfully becoming aware of the many ways in which the genocide experienced by our people through colonial policies, such as the residential school system, has impacted us, the ways in which this system has directly or indirectly affected our leadership is yet to be fully understood. For example, how has attending residential school or being raised by a Survivor, impacted leadership styles?[23] How might residential school impacts and the trauma we experienced be curtailing or hindering our ability to negotiate, acknowledge past harms, and/or confront and hold accountable those who actually represent our perpetrators? How might the trauma of this genocidal experience have us today believing there is any good reason that 52% of the children currently in the care of the government are Indigenous children?

Add on top of this that we have not yet thoroughly explored the ways in which the so-called anti-potlatch law has impacted us. I think we see clearly how it impacted our cultural

[23] This particular question was raised by Otis Jasper during an interview for my dissertation. Otis was interviewed after my then-ten-year-old daughter reminded me not to forget "the updated version."

practices and beliefs and our ceremonies. But do we clearly see how this colonial law impacted our economy, our banking system, our health care system, our educational system, and our governing systems? The anti-potlatch law didn't just outlaw our ability to drum, sing, and pray; it made it illegal to participate in all aspects of our social, cultural, legal, political, and economic systems. What compensation, what reconciliation efforts have been forthcoming for this?

Good *Stó:lō* Leadership

In terms of conflating multiple *Sí:yá:m* roles, each with a specialized area of expertise, into a singular "chief" role without any qualifications required, has created a lot of division, conflict, and stagnation among the *Stó:lō*. For the *Stó:lō*, pre-contact, we had at minimum seven types of leadership per *Ó:wkw'elmexw* (tribe, in english). Our leaders were not called "chiefs"; they were *Sí:yá:m*, which translates into english as Respected Ones. Each *O:wkw'elmexw* could have, for example, a (1) *H'iweyxw Siyá:m* (head leader); (2) a *Qwóqwel* (a speaker; the term actually translates into english as Heart-Speaker); (3) *Shxwlám* (healer); (4) *Stó:méx* (protector); (5) *Tewít* (provider); (6) *Sia:teleq*[24] (the historian and dispute settler); and (7) *Sí:le* (Grandparent).

By carefully listening to and learning from *sxwōxwiyám* and contemporary *Sí:yá:m*, the following traits of a good *Stó:lō* leader are displayed: (1) *knows* who s/he is;[25] (2) is *spiritual*;[26] (3) is meaningfully *connected* to territory; (4) is *óyó:lwethet*;[27] (5) is *respected* (*Siyá:m*); (6) can achieve *lets'mot*[28] among the people; and (7) is a good *listener*. Acknowledging these traits through various sxwōxwiyám is one way I think we can take teachings from our past, from our ancestry, and apply them today. In my opinion, they are all the more necessary today, given our current colonial state. It would be interesting to see how much progress we could make if all our contemporary *Stó:lō* leaders were required to have all these traits in order to lead the people.

Defining a *Xwélmexw* Nation

Among the *Stó:lō*, the lack of meaningful organization is further complicated by our diversity. Along cultural lines and spiritual beliefs, there is an amazingly powerful, yet complex, web of relationships that tie *Xwélmexw* together in very meaningful ways. Yet along political and/or Indian Act-dictated lines, there is an almost complete lack of cohesion and organization, in addition to a lack of solidarity. With a strategy of "divide and conquer," the Indian Act and institutions such as the BCTC have done a great job of undoing or preventing transnational

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[24] See also McHalsie (2007, p. 97) for this term used in relation to resource management.
[25] This means that one can trace one's ancestry back several generations—I heard at least seven generations.
[26] Not to be confused with religious.
[27] *Halq'eméylem* term meaning to be doing the best one can.
[28] *Halq'eméylem* term meaning to be of one mind and heart. This is a governing principle whereby a good leader can lead the people to come to agree on the best way forward.

efforts at organization. The pan-Indianism inherent in the Indian Act has created mass confusion and, in many cases, the stagnation of our ability to unite communities on a tribal, never mind national, level. While several communities and tribes identify as being *Stó:lō*, for example, we are only one grouping of several belonging to a larger national identity of a *Xwélmexw* Nation (see footnote 7).

Concluding Remarks

In abiding by an IRM, I was able to come to not only experience, but to understand and begin to document, what it takes to be self-determining. I was able to shed light on true Indigenous governing principles while living under a colonial regime. Abiding by an IRM meant I had to "live" my research, to tell my story from a decolonized mind, body, and spirit, to learn from *Stó:lō* epistemologies, and above all to make sure my research could contribute to change and Indigenous empowerment. My research therefore is as much about my painful journey in decolonization, as it is about empowerment and coming to understand Indigenous governing principles.

My journey was guided by the teachings of *Xexá:ls* and therefore is inextricably linked to *Stó:lō* territory, ontology, and epistemology. Through the teachings of *Xexá:ls*, I was able to see behind the colonial barricade of disempowerment, disconnection, alienation, and disease (Alfred, 1999). Behind this barricade, I discovered *Stó:lō* governing principles provided within our cultural teachings and transformations throughout our territory that speak to the power of place, the importance of women, the laws of our ancestors, and the title to territory embedded within our *sxwōxwiyám* and ancestral names.

I have also come to understand that before we can truly appreciate *Stó:lō* governing structures and principles, we have to acknowledge colonial impacts and effects. If we are to truly effect change—that is, if we are to truly move out from behind the colonial barricade—we must do so honestly and authentically. We cannot do this if we are not willing to be real and acknowledge what has happened to us and how it has impacted us not only individually as human beings, but also collectively as Peoples.

I wish I could say, "It's a good thing we have all the time in the world to sort all this out." But we don't—in fact, time is of the essence. We have become much too complacent in our colonial misery; we are taking too long to remember who we are. Meanwhile, our women and children are dying—literally dying—as a result of this colonial mayhem and our collective amnesia. We do not have any time left: the time is now. It is "Indian" time right now—it is the right time to change, to transform, to reclaim our rightful places within our societies and within our respective nations. The time is right for *Xwélmexw Hakw'eles*, to remember ourselves, to return to our teachings of *Xexá:ls* and our governing principle of "all our relations."

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