

## PERSPECTIVES

### WHERE IS HERE?

**Ronald L. Grimes**

Professor Emeritus

Dept. of Religion & Culture, Wilfrid Laurier University

ronaldlgrimes@gmail.com

A block away there is a plaque tucked away in a front yard filled with so much greenery that the house is almost hidden. Each time I pass, I stop to read, "We would like to acknowledge that we are on the Haldimand Tract, land promised to Six Nations in 1784, traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples."

As I stroll, I wonder: Who is we? Where is here?

In 2017 the Canadian Association of University Teachers published *A Guide to Acknowledging First Peoples and Traditional Territory*. Twenty-eight pages long, the document is full of opening gambits for arts, academic and ceremonial events. Many begin, "We would like to acknowledge...."

I'm a neighbor to the plaque's owner. We neighbors love the pieces of land upon which we squat. I tend my front and back yards and say "my," as if I owned this land. I'm not sure what's under my neighbor's yard, but below mine are ritual deposits: thirty-five years of pets, placentas, memorabilia, kid art, toys, and squirrel carcasses. If I had my way about it, my skin and bones would be burned and the ashes buried in the back yard.

To live in Waterloo's Westmount neighborhood (named after the ritzy Westmount of Montreal), we signed contracts, filled the pockets of lawyers and mortgage companies to purchase our lots and homes. Now we pay property taxes so the region can dump salt on our streets and build a rail system that connects two shopping centres. None of this tax money is mailed as a rent cheque to Neutral, Anishnaabeg, or Haudenosaunee people.

In 1650 the Five Nations were at home southeast of Lake Ontario, in what is now New York state. During the American Revolution Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) had to choose sides. Many allied with the British. After the war, they were rewarded for their loyalty to the crown. Frederic Haldimand issued the Haldimand Proclamation in 1784. The Proclamation declares:

Whereas His Majesty having been pleased to direct that in consideration of the early attachment to his cause manifested by the Mohawk Indians and of the loss of their settlement which they thereby sustained—that a convenient tract of land under his protection should be chosen as a safe and comfortable retreat for them and others of the Six Nations, who have either lost their settlements within the Territory of the American States, or wish to retire from them to the British—I have at the earnest desire of many of these His Majesty's faithful Allies purchased a tract of land from the Indians situated between the Lakes Ontario, Erie and Huron, and I do hereby in His Majesty's name authorize and permit the said Mohawk Nation and such others of the Six Nation Indians as wish to settle in that quarter to take possession of and settle upon the Banks of the River commonly called Ouse [O:se Kenhionhata:tie, in English, "Willow River"] or Grand River, running into Lake Erie, allotting to them for that purpose six miles deep from each side of the river beginning at Lake Erie and extending in that proportion to the head of the said river, which them and their posterity are to enjoy forever.<sup>1</sup>

Originally, the Haldimand Tract was a twelve-mile wide strip following the course of the Grand River in Ontario. The original tract of 1784 contained 950,00 acres; now it has shrunk to 46,000 acres—less than 5% of its original size. The shape of original tract resembled a knee-sock, but if you compare that with the deflated-soccer-ball shape of 2015 (which is now Six Nations Reserve), you can imagine what has happened. The story has been repeated over and over in North America.

Between 2018 and 2020 Mary Anne Caibaiosai, organized the All Nations Grand River Walk<sup>2</sup> to sing to the water, "We will honour the Grand River by praying for, singing for, and carrying her with a ceremonial pail. We will follow our beliefs and teachings that water is life; has spirit and without her we would not be here. Our word for water is 'Nibi' and we say 'Nga Zichiige Nibi Onji'—We do it for the water. This walk is not just a walk; it is a ceremony. We are walking to help the water. We believe when we sing for her, offer her good words and prayers, that she will become clean."

Ken Wilson, a non-native, walked the Haldimand Tract and said, "I'm making this walk, this performance, because I want to know with my body, with my muscle and bone, the extent of the territory that has been stolen from the Haudenosaunee (or Six Nations) since the tract was reserved for them in 1784."<sup>3</sup>

I walk daily beneath the aging maples of Westmount in Kitchener-Waterloo. While we mow our lawns, rein in our dogs, and barbeque in our backyards, we occupy Indian land. We violate the treaty. We

break the law. We walk unethically. We provoke conflict.

Legal fights, sometimes alternating with fist fights, continue today. One of the longest and most violent land-claim disputes in Ontario began in 2006, then re-erupted in 2013 at the Douglas Creek Estates in Caledonia.

I could say about my turf, "I own it," since I bought it. By Canadian law, it is "mine." However, Francis Boots, a Mohawk from Awkwesasne, an elder with whom I sometimes work, is teaching us settlers to say, "the land for which I am responsible."

My turf is located in Kitchener-Waterloo, near the middle of the old Haldimand tract. Kitchener was once called Berlin, a German-settled town known for shoe and boot-liner manufacturing. Greb, Oberholtzer, Breithaupt, Kaufman, Berlin Felt Boot, Berlin Trunk & Bag ruled the roost. But "made in Berlin" would not sell your shoes during World War I, so in 1916 Berlin became Kitchener, named after Herbert Kitchener, a British Secretary of State for War in 1914. My turf was native land, then GermanTown. Now it aspires to become TechHub and MultiCultureLand.

Jack Hawley taught a course at Barnard College, Columbia University. The course was called Hinduism Here.<sup>4</sup> Students walk out the front door, look up and down Broadway and ask, where is Hinduism—here, not in India, right here, where we study and work. In the mid-twentieth century religious studies courses would not have started with a place but with sacred texts. Students would have read the Vedas or Upanishads to understand religion over there, in India, not here, where we walk. In the twenty-first century things have changed. Hindus *here* matter. They are our neighbors and friends.

I talk to myself as I stroll the sidewalks of Westmount: "Hey, white man, put your finger on *here*." Then I ask myself, "What should I touch? The ground? My eyes? Head? Heart? Belly?"

Wherever I touch as *here*, I also create a *there*. *Here* I am, but some more of me is *there*. I gaze down at my feet. The upper *here* reaches to a lower *there*, the floor where my feet rest, then the foundation, then the ground.

My *here* extends. I occupy space. I need it to breathe. I suck air, puff carbon dioxide. My *here* extends up, down, out. How far? How much air space do I need?

I share space with others, but, for the sake of this imagined experiment, let's keep the boundaries tight. Suppose I, a white-man-owner of real estate, pull my wife and children, maybe a dog, under an imaginary canopy. Throw in the lawn—right out to the fence line. But that's it, no more. That's the suburban, white, middle-class *here*. Seal the bubble. The canopy encloses me, my family, my stuff, my property. As a man of moral and economic principle, should I defend this to the death?

But *here* is only for *now*. I am here now. Previously I was elsewhere.

Later, I will move to some other place. My kids have flown the nest to Toronto. They live elsewhere. For my family's sake I now need a big *here* that includes parents and kids in a single bubble.

How long will I last like this? Not long. I'll suffocate, need food, others to love or have conflict with. If I die here, somebody will take my property, sell it. Then I'll be down *there* in the ground or up in the sky as ash particles. My *here* will belong to somebody else over *there*, on the other side.

This me-and-mine experiment is as foolish as Rene Descartes' "I think, therefore I am." I own my property, therefore I am — the very definition of sacred space to many settlers.

Another answer to the "where is here" question is played out in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*. Rebecca says,

I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope. The address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

GEORGE

What's funny about that?

REBECCA:

But listen, it's not finished: the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God — that's what it said on the envelope.<sup>5</sup>

Jane is sick, so her world shrinks—she and her pain constitute the world. The minister's letter intervenes, trying to remap Jane's world outward toward the earth, the universe, and God. Whereas the *me-and-mine* experiment seals me in, therefore ultimately kills me, the *our-town* response imagines lines radiating from *here* to out *there*, infinitely.

The lines run through Grover's Corners, small-town USA, a site of American nostalgia. White North Americans sometimes wish the world were as cozy and safe as life in an imagined turn-of-the-century town. We make pilgrimages to Disneyland to re-inhabit those towns momentarily, but should we use guns to protect Grover's Corners? It's ours, damn it, not yours. Don't tread on me. Who are you to intrude upon our town? We're insiders in God's universe; you are not. Who are you? Where's your place? Over *there*? Surely not *here*. Between us is a wall.

In 1791 the Crown appointed Augustus Jones, a surveyor, to clarify the boundaries of the Haldimand Tract in Ontario. There had been an error in establishing its northern boundary. Jones, not being an indigenous

person, decided to fix other mistakes, the curves of the river banks. He drew ruler-straight boundaries rather than follow the sinuous boundaries that the Grand River.

Basia Irland is an artist who once lived in Waterloo but now lives in New Mexico. She began to walk the other Grand, the Rio Grande. It was called the "Royal Road" by the Spaniards who colonized New Mexico. They followed its course for good reason: without its water, they would die of dehydration. Basia's project, *A Gathering of Waters: The Rio Grande, Source to Sea*, traced the 1875 miles of the Rio Grande from southern Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico. She describes the enactment:

Hundreds of participants put a small amount of river water into a River Vessel Canteen, wrote in a Logbook, and passed these downstream to another person. Connections were made that have been lasting, and groups are working together that never would have met otherwise. In order to participate in this project, you had to physically be at the river and interact with someone else downstream, thereby forming a kind of human river that brings awareness to the plight of this stream that is always asked to give more than it has.<sup>6</sup>

Here, north of the magical 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, Ateronhiata:kon (Francis Boots, from Akwesasne) was asked in a video interview, "What do 'they' want?" He knows "they" means First Nations people.<sup>7</sup> Go to 46 minutes, 10 seconds to hear the question. Then, Francis' stunningly simple response at 46:51, "Good neighbors."

"What?" white folks exclaim, "that's it? that's all?"

Francis, I imagine, would say, "Yep, that's it. That's all."

Jesus would agree, "Love thy neighbor."

Since we all agree—Mohawks and Christian settlers, probably Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs—why the not-so-neighborly feud over boundaries and land?

I am a good neighbor to the retired lawyer who lives beside me. We make trades. He owns a snow blower and loans it to me during heavy winter snow storms. I shovel his sidewalks when he's at the cottage.

I have no trade agreements with my downriver neighbors who live at Six Nations Reserve. When I ritually recite, "We would like to acknowledge...", the words sound hollow. On public occasions, after we conclude the recitation, I want to shout, "Bad ritual, really, really bad ritual."

Why is it a bad ritual? Imagine that you are a Catholic and confess, "Father, I confess..." (make your list of sins short or long.) "...that I stole the land of my neighbor."

The revered father instructs me, "My son, repent, then make restitution."

The next time I enter the confessional, he (always a he), asks, even before I make my next confession, "My son, did you make restitution?"

"No, father, sorry."

"Sorry? Stop apologizing. My son, you have to make restitution, pay your debt, do it better next time. If you don't, your confessions are useless. No one will forgive you. Your debt column will get longer and longer; your credit column, shorter and shorter. So pay up. Give it back. Be a better neighbor."

I bite my tongue to keep from pointing out the obvious: his church also occupies the Haldimand Tract.

In a recent email Otiohkwa Shenandoah (Philip Deering), a Mohawk from Kahnawake and friend of Francis Boots, sketched a scene from the Oka trial: "The star witness for the Mohawk was Bruce Elijah. He testified for hours. He said 'We saw you come from Europe. You brought your religion. That's yours. Nobody wants to take it from you. You brought your laws. Those are yours. Nobody wants to take them from you. But we didn't see you bring any land. So, how did it become *your* land?'"<sup>8</sup>

I didn't bring any land with me when I moved across the border from the US to Canada. I suppose I could have trucked some dirt across the 49th. But even if I could have hauled my bit of acreage, how far down would that New Mexico land be mine? How far up? Do I own the air above my land? How far down and how far up does "here" go? And did I really own that New Mexico land? Not really. My ancestors turfed the Comanches from it. Either way—I bring land from the US or buy it in Canada—the land is stolen. How about borrowed—a conscience-salving option?

As a good neighbor to the lawyer next door, I can borrow his snow blower, but can I expropriate his land? Maybe, but then I wouldn't be a neighbor at all. I'd be in prison.

I'm stuck. How to become a good upriver neighbor? The question is a koan. It burns the belly, singes the heart, stops easy breathing. From here in Waterloo, how far out does my neighborhood reach? To Six Nations of the Grand River it's 76 km., an hour and ten minutes by car. How long on foot? By canoe? Depends on age, strength, and wind.

I talk and correspond with a few indigenous friends and students, but what else? The bottom line: I can never repay the debt I owe. I am filled with gratitude for my bit of turf, but even gratitude can seem like an insult.

What else?

Today I would vote to raise my taxes. The region could use the tax money to lease the land I occupy from Six Nations. Despite my good intentions, I am part of an occupying army, wielding dollars. If we want to stop the war, we have to be willing to give up what is sacred to settlers:

dollars.

What else?

If those who ritually repeat, "I hereby acknowledge..." were to express gratitude by singing to rivers and birds and making reparations by leasing native land, those actions wouldn't make us good neighbors, but they could be the opening gestures of ceremonial respect.<sup>9</sup>

\*\*\*

Ron Grimes is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada, where he taught courses on ritual studies, religion and the performing arts, and field research in the study of religion. Grimes is co-editor of the Oxford Ritual Studies Series, the author of several books on ritual, including *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, as well as a videographer.

### Notes

1. Michelle Filice, *Haldimand Proclamation*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/haldimand-proclamation>
2. Mary Anne Caibaiosai, *All Nations Grand River Water Walk 2020*, <https://www.grandriverwaterwalk.com/information>.
3. Ken Wilson, *Muscle and Bone: Walking the Haldimand Tract*, <https://muscleandboneblog.wordpress.com/>.
4. Jack Hawley, *Hinduism Here*, <https://edblogs.columbia.edu/reliw4215-001-2013-3/challenges-to-the-course/>.
- 5.. Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (New York Harper & Row, 1957 [1938]), 45.
6. Basia Irland, *Rio Grande Repository*, <http://www.basiairland.com/projects/gatherings/rio-grande.html>.
7. Ronald L. Grimes. *A Discussion after the Atiahronthkhonhsera, Part 1*. Online video, <https://vimeo.com/325714707>. This video is part of a larger set of Native Immigrant films. See Ronald L. Grimes. *Native Immigrant Showcase*. Vimeo album, <https://vimeo.com/manage/showcases/3524030/info>.
8. Philip Deering, Email communication with Ron Grimes.
9. In past few years institutions have begun requesting forgiveness and expressing gratitude. Some organizations are beginning to list their "sins:" colonization, expulsion, assimilation, promise-break-

ing, treaty-violation, the establishment of residential schools.... The list goes on and on. Few of the ritualized confessions use blatant words like "murder" or "genocide."

On the positive side there is a slowly emerging call for recognizing indigenous contributions, hiring native applicants, and a commitment to making sure the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission become real.

On black reparations in the United States, see Nikole Hannah-Jones, "What Is Owed," in *New York Times Magazine* (2020).

### References

- Caibaosai, Mary Anne. 2020. *All Nations Grand River Water Walk 2020*. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://www.grandriverwaterwalk.com/information>.
- Deering, Philip. Email communication with Ron Grimes, 16 May 2019.
- Filice, Michelle. 2016. *Haldimand Proclamation*. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/haldimand-proclamation>
- Grimes, Ronald L. *A Discussion after the Atiahrontkhonhsera, Part 1*. Online video, 2019. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://vimeo.com/325714707>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Native Immigrant Showcase*. Vimeo album, 2019. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://vimeo.com/manage/showcases/3524030/info>.
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2020. *What Is Owed*. Online magazine article. Accessed 26 June 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/24/magazine/reparations-slavery.html>.
- Hawley, Jack. 2019. *Hinduism Here*. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://edblogs.columbia.edu/reliw4215-001-2013-3/challenges-to-the-course/>.
- Irland, Basia. 2020. *Río Grande Repository*. Accessed 20 June 2020. <http://www.basiairland.com/projects/gatherings/rio-grande.html>.
- Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town*. New York Harper & Row, 1957 [1938].
- Wilson, Ken. 2016. *Muscle and Bone: Walking the Haldimand Tract*. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://muscleandboneblog.wordpress.com/>.