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Nikma'jtut Apoqmatultinej: Reclaiming Indigeneity via ancestral wisdom and new ways of thinking

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Introduction

Settler colonialism continues to marginalize and threaten Indigenous epistemology, languages and ways of knowing. This eight week auto-ethnographic study details my use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to deconstruct the epistemological and ontological perspectives I have acquired during my lived experience immersed in settler society. My hope is to gain better insight into Mi'gmaw worldview through an introspective journey to learn my mother's language thus my own cultural identity.

Auto-ethnography requires that the researcher provide intimate insight to a cultural narrative and at the same time have the ability to analyze and extract the strands of knowledge from their lived experience (Adams, Bochner & Ellis 2010). Indigenous Auto-Ethnography seeks to resist the more dominant ideologies by deconstructing and reconstructing various historical accounts (Whitinui 2013).

The conversation I present in this paper focuses on healing and revitalizing the sparks of Indigenous wisdom and knowledge our ancestors left behind. In order to blaze a path forward toward growth and prosperity for marginalized and oppressed groups, deconstructing the road taken can be an enlightening experience.

A view from the shore¹: A deconstructive narrative of the colonial experience

The historical narrative of Indigenous groups in the territory more commonly known as Canada has been a drastically different experience than the history espoused by settler society. The negative impact of the power and domination of the colonial state towards Indigenous nations has been identified at home and abroad (Anaya, 2014; United Nations, 2007). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996) describes settler colonialism as an egregious assault on the well-being of Indigenous individuals, families and nations alike that has spanned across five centuries and which is still maintained through the use of federal and provincial laws and policy (RCAP, 1996).

Before European contact Indigenous nations were self-determining societies that existed and thrived for approximately 525 generations (Blackstock & Trocme, 2005). Assimilation and the colonial experience have deconstructed this balance (RCAP 1996) which has resulted in devastating outcomes for First Nations. Education policy in present day Canada espouses the values of settler colonialism which

¹ Gkisedtanamoogk is a Wampanoag elder and ceremonial leader. He says there are two ways of looking at the history of our peoples: a view from the boat and view from the shore.

continues to negatively impact the overall way of life for Indigenous communities (AFN, 2010; Battiste 2013).

Much of the low educational attainment and graduation rates for Aboriginal students attending public education models developed by settler colonial governments are attributed to racism and culturally inappropriate curriculum (Donovan 2007). Battiste (2013) suggests that a phenomenon she calls cognitive imperialism is created when generations of Indigenous knowledge is marginalized or outright excluded in lieu of western values and ontology. Historically, this has been meted out in Canada via assimilative education policy and administered historically by residential schools. The result is an intergenerational trauma for Indigenous peoples that stifles growth and prosperity throughout successive generations (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman 2014).

Through the development of educational resources, Indigenous groups who replaced western epistemology and ontology with their own have seen a reverse trend of the assimilation policies and an increase in Indigenous consciousness (Battiste 2000; Battiste 2013). Advancing the struggle for self-determination for Indigenous people, the use of ICT has enabled Indigenous groups to create, facilitate and control the social structures that determine their futures (McMahon, Gurstein, Beaton, O'Donnell, & Whiteduck 2014).

Indigenous people in Canada are harnessing ICT to deliver Indigenous language curriculum as a means of cultural resilience and language revitalization. The Tagish nation whose language is considered the most endangered language in the Yukon have used ICT to their advantage to undo the loss of language and cultural created by the residential school era (Hennessy & Moore 2007). Through the use of ICT the Mi'gmaq nation has been able to produce culturally-appropriate curriculum via the internet to deliver educational materials to Mi'gmaq communities and households which has shown unprecedented improvements in educational success for Mi'gmaq students living in Nova Scotia (Lewington, 2010).

ICT has enabled Indigenous nations to share traditional knowledge and ancient wisdom with greater ease and scope with their people in remote areas which are isolated from accessing education institutions (Neal, Barr & Barrett 2007). In Kitigan Zibi, an Algonquin First Nation in Quebec north of Ottawa, ICT has enabled the community to incorporate a variety of multi-media tools to enhance the delivery of their own education models (Lockhart, Tenasco, Whiteduck & O'Donnell, 2014). The use of ICT, in particular social media and networking sites, has shown to improve communication and relationship building within the same community as well as bridging the distant relations between communities in vast northern territories (Molyneaux, O'Donnell, Kakekaspan, Walmark, Budka & Gibson 2014). ICT and social networking sites have the potential to enhance and reconstruct cultural identities that can help the ultimate goal of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination (Beaton & Campbell 2014). Online educational resources are becoming much better at delivering curriculum. ICT allow a learner to enjoy life-long self-guided learning.

Worldwide Indigenous people are calling for more authority in relation to the development of policy and programs to suit the educational needs of Indigenous learners in a culturally appropriate way (Donovan 2007). Internationally, experts in Indigenous knowledge and learning styles along with experts in e-learning are collaborating with Indigenous groups to develop culturally appropriate education models for Indigenous learners (Neal, Barr & Barrett 2007). There is a positive sense that together this collective wisdom and collaborative effort will have a greater effect on the overall well-being between settler and Indigenous societies.

Yet the question remains, how can marginalized and oppressed groups reclaim the determining factors affecting their cultural identity, future growth and prosperity amidst the enormous influence, impact and authority of a settler society? And how can ICT support these efforts?

Methodology

This paper presents an analysis of an eight-week self-discovery research project through an auto-ethnographic lens. Each week I engaged in learning Mi'gmaq via online sites dedicated to teaching that language. In addition, each week I spent time with a fluent Mi'gmaq speaker and ceremonial elder. I collected my experiences through weekly journals that detail my insight regarding three conceptual ideas: ICT and decolonization, Indigeneity revitalization, and interdependence. This paper focuses on one of those concepts, ICT and decolonization.

Auto-ethnography requires that the researcher provide intimate insight to a cultural narrative and at the same time have the ability to analyze and extract the strands of knowledge from their lived experience (Adams, Bochner & Ellis 2010). Auto-ethnography is an ideal lens for this paper because it allows me to share a narrative that is both ethically sound and culturally appropriate with Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. Life consists of overlapping stories and if we do not open up and listen to other people's stories we stifle those authentic voices and run the risk of understanding life from only our personal experience (Whitinui 2013).

Battiste (2013) suggests that Indigenous people are moving away from critical analysis in order to focus on healing the wounds of a collective experience of such trauma via self-reflection of their own narratives in order to discover their inner strengths.

Indigenous auto-ethnography by its very definition asks us to consider epistemological perspectives equally and to draw together self (auto), ethno (nation), and graphy (writing). It also asks researchers interested in this method to consider their own level of connectedness to space, place, time, and culture as a way of (re)claiming, (re)storing, (re)writing, and (re)patriating our own lived realities as indigenous peoples. In many instances, merely telling our stories is not sufficient; we must also be prepared to show how stories are lived in authentically as well as meaningfully ways (Whitinui 2013).

At the same time, the research methodology of auto-ethnography allows me to reflect objectively on my lived experience lens providing my research scholarly merit (Ellis 2004; Chang 2008). This mixed-methods approach allows me to explore introspectively how my life and worldview has been touched by settler colonialism.

All my life I have been immersed in the social structures of settler society while being raised with Indigenous values which has resulted in an overlapping and distorted worldview (Littler Bear 2000). As an emerging Indigenous researcher working for change I chose to take up this research in order to analyze my jagged worldview and gain a clearer view through a Mi'gmaq lens. I entered graduate school because I wanted to better understand the world that shaped my reality. The methods I have chosen introduced me to social movements and critical thought focused on deconstructing our collective social reality. In this process I find myself wondering more and more what future society is waiting for my grandchildren's grandchildren. I believe research efforts today can effectively improve our society by giving voice to marginalized and oppressed people and groups.

Introspective thoughts from my eight-week exploration of ICT through auto-ethnography

For this project I used two self-guided language learning websites. The Aboriginal Language Initiative (<http://firstnationhelp.com/ali/>) is a website hosted by Atlantic Canada's First Nation Help Desk based in Membertou, Nova Scotia, and provides basic sentences, vocabulary lessons, language posters, and an online dictionary intended to provide the learner with the ability to guide their own learning of the Mi'gmaq language. The other site I used, Migmaq Online (<http://www.mikmaqonline.org/>) describes itself as a talking dictionary project which is based in Listuguj, Quebec. They provide over 3,500 Mi'gmaq words that can be accessed orally by fluent speakers. In addition to these online resources, I also met weekly with Miigam'agan a fluent speaker of Mi'gmaq, the Elder-in-Residence at St. Thomas University.

After a short while on these sites I found them both to mimic the teaching methods you would find in a mainstream provincial classroom. A one-way, top-down form of communication which does not allow for much interplay between the learner and the teaching method, fundamentally different from Indigenous ways of learning and knowing that I have come to know. Indigenous learning methods involve communal learning, collaborative efforts and reciprocity between the learner and the learning method. At the end of eight weeks I felt I learned more from my weekly meetings with Miigam'agan because of the free exchange of ideas.

I had so many questions regarding the structural use of the language and neither site offered an opportunity for interaction with a Mi'gmaq language specialist. The two sites that I used did offer some help regarding phonetics but questions about sentence structure and tenses were left unanswered. My weekly meetings with Miigam'agan who grew up speaking and living her language provided me with answers. Having a fluent and bilingual speaker to ask questions and share ideas with was very helpful for someone like me who grew up influenced by two worldviews. For our weekly conversations I would join Miigam'agan at work in the Wabanaki Resource Center at St. Thomas University. Every time we met we were joined by Indigenous undergraduate students who then formed their own Mi'gmaq language group. Evidence of the communal spirit Indigenous ways of knowing and learning hold.

ICT allows the opportunity to make learning more interactive and to incorporate alternative ways of learning. Learning a language can be done in many ways. I would hope that in the future the online learning sites I used would harness advances in ICT and provide a more communal lesson plan for their sites.

During this project I discovered the contributions to language recovery and resurgences of Savannah Simon, a Mi'gmaq language advocate (<https://www.youtube.com/user/MsNativeWarrior>). Through Savannah's videos I was able to hear the language being used in real life situations and can see the emotion and facial features that are involved in the phonetics. I can see and hear the joy that the participants in the videos radiate with when they are speaking their mother tongue. Her work shows how the next generation of Indigenous educators are blending Indigenous knowledge and advances in technology. After viewing Savannah Simon's videos and seeing her enthusiasm I see a future where online learning sites will become more interactive as technology and society advance and Mi'gmaq society gains more authority over the social structures that govern their growth and prosperity.

In my broader graduate research I am investigating how Indigenous groups worldwide are overcoming the obstacles settler colonialism represents. Some have shown great strides in harnessing the

technology of ICT and adapting it to recover and revitalize their endangered languages. The Maori for example have made great strides in halting the extinction of their language via ICT (<http://www.tewhanake.maori.nz/>). Their online presence is showing how other Indigenous groups whose languages are on the brink of extinction can recover them. The ease and relatively low cost of ICT compared to traditional educational resources make it a viable option for language resurgence.

It can be argued that online resources by themselves are not congruent with an Indigenous worldview if they promote individual learning. Since time immemorial humans have grouped together for safety and survival. The communal spirit in my territory is represented in the longhouse tradition. I was told once that our lives are succession of circles, like a Russian nesting doll. Our inner circle is our mind, body, and spirit and as we move outward from that inner circle we invite others in to our world. Our circles overlap with theirs and together we grow and prosper. ICT is showing that it can be adapted to meet those cultural protocols. Any Indigenous group can design, facilitate and determine the recovery and resurgence of their language in their own way.

My story and conclusions

During my preparations for this project I searched the internet for sites dedicated to the Mi'gmaq language. In my research I also found online collections of Mi'gmaq stories and legends. I love reading these old stories and reading them again reminded me of how awesome it was to discover them as an undergraduate student. I was new to Canada then and just starting to understand my own understanding of being Mi'gmaq and these stories were a treasure trove of knowledge for me. I went so far as to use these stories as parenting aids with my own kids and a teaching aide as a classroom educator.

Having worked in the education field for most of my career I am well aware of the limited amount of resources available for culturally appropriate educational materials when you consider budgets and cost factors. I didn't realize how cost effective and readily available ICT has become until undertaking this project. Building an online learning site or even updating and reformatting the two I have used thus far is quite attainable. It is a perfect way to introduce methods of learning that incorporate the whole family in the learning process as well.

Adapting such an online site to include the ever expanding field of mobile sites and "apps" for newer forms of technology can be done with simple technology. This would reach out to a broader and more inclusive demographic as more and more people are making use of personal communication devices on a daily basis. Instead of "crushing candy" we could enable our youth to have access to ancestral language, knowledge and wisdom. With further research in this area the recovery of endangered languages could become another tool of resistance against the linguicide it has experienced thus far.

In a positive light the overall lesson of settler colonialism can be that Indigenous societies have been made to become resilient. Indigenous languages and cultures have persevered through centuries of assault. In the Mi'gmaq creation story, the prophetic figure Glooscap after his creation embarked on a journey to explore and learn about his territory. When he finished his journey, he returned home where he met his family, who taught him how to live, grow and prosper. There he also found sparks left over from his own creation and from them he built a sacred fire from which emanated sparks that formed into our first ancestors. One day our journey through settler colonialism will end and out of that will spark a flame of resurgence.

There is a disconnect for many Indigenous students at the post-secondary level homesickness and the isolation of pursuing higher education creates further stressors in the lives of post-secondary students. As Director of Aboriginal Student Services at St. Thomas University my first goal was to find an Elder-in-Residence and that is how I became close to Miigam'agan. The role of the grandmother and family is so prominent in my culture and I knew I needed someone like her to help me build a home away from home for those students. Most of the Indigenous students I met during that time hoped to move back to their home after their studies but were concerned about jobs. They contain within in them those embers, and when they return home they may very well harness the gifts ICT has to offer and make the fire of resurgence grow even brighter.

ICT could serve as grandmother so to speak. Nogami, Glooscap's grandmother was the first to come to him and she taught him how to survive. There is a close connection between grandparents and their grandchildren. In my own life three of my four grandparents died before I was born and my mom's mom passed away before I was a teenager and I never built a relationship with her. However along my journey I met many grandparents who shared their wisdom with me. Much of my own parenting style was influenced by that wisdom. In our ways we keep those ancient long house traditions going and using ICT can provide a medium for us to enhance and advance those traditions.

During my undergraduate years at university, if I had had ICT tools to access cultural wisdom when I was feeling down and blue it could have helped me avoid much struggle and strife. I fortunately reached out to elders and the spiritual community and found much guidance from them. Maslow's hierarchy of needs tells us that if a person is nurtured in a culturally appropriate and loving way their chances of healthy growth and prosperity is high. Using ICT to connect with cultural resources can become a monumental part of healthy growth and prosperity for Indigenous people.

I became a parent twice before turning 21 and I really had no clue about the reality this world has to offer if you're a member of a marginalized and oppressed group. During this time I was majoring in Native Studies and learning how the Canadian structure has fundamentally impacted the Indigenous way of life. It was very important for me to then to navigate this world in such a way that I could effectively show my children how to stand up in a society that had forced their ancestors to kneel and grovel. I feel doing this for my own children evolved into a desire to nurture growth and prosperity for other people hoping to take control of the factors guiding their lives.

An ICT hub would allow for Mi'gmau people to learn language, cultural values and traditions. As I wade my way through graduate studies I am strongly aware that for Indigenous society, nation building is more than just a concept, it is our reality. We have every right to establish our own education structures that are locally governed and administered at the community level and ICT provides us with a framework and the tools to deliver it. We have every legal and human right to do so but we continue to reproduce models of education that mimic Eurocentric values and ways of knowing but with a little bit of Indigenous language and culture. Indigenous nations can effectively use ICT to save endangered languages and revitalize Indigenous ways of knowing, all at the community level.

This project allowed me to reconnect with the spirit of the grassroots movement. During my undergraduate degree at St. Thomas I became quite involved in grassroots movements to recognize Indigenous and treaty rights. Since then life took me in other directions and having worked in a non-Indigenous environment I feel I lost touch with that spirit of resistance against oppression. I wanted to

reconnect with those cultural teachings I learned during my first long term residence in Wulstukwiuk territory.

Through this project I have to understand the Mi'gmaq creation story in a much deeper way. I have also come to understand the fundamental differences between Indigenous and European languages. This project allowed me to witness and learn from my own lived experience. I feel that the introspectiveness and discipline that formal research demands of the researcher has allowed me to learn from my own "creation stories". I feel that I am much more culturally prepared to begin my Master's thesis.

This project revealed to me that one-on-one, individual learning is not the most culturally appropriate way to move forward for Indigenous groups. My own research has allowed me to see that a single tree does not a forest make. The most natural way of learning and living in this world is to be congruent with the natural order, the original instructions. The original instructions tell us that we thrive better if we do so together.

Saving our languages is the most important task going forward. Although this study was small in scope with limited resources it highlights that ICT can be a medium for Indigenous groups to make their own language resources. With further research ICT can become a way wherein we can save our languages while also healing the wounds that the residential school era created, the loss of cultural identity. Revitalizing well-being and creating a holistic and positive environment for growth can also be a part of saving endangered languages.

The lived experience of marginalized and oppressed groups is not always captured in the dominant historical narratives we find in school textbooks. The greater goal of self-determination for Indigenous society begins with first understanding how we arrived to this moment in history. The conversation I present in this paper I hope will lead to more research into historical narratives that have been obfuscated and lost in the margins of history.

One of the most common responses I get from people when I discuss Indigenous issues is that happened a long time ago and it is time to move on so get over it. I was most shocked when I heard sentiments like that from my colleagues when I myself was a classroom teacher at a high school very near to my home community. It is so hard to break through those attitudes and preconceived ideas. Auto-ethnography is a means through which we can learn directly from those who are oppressed.

During my undergraduate degree a friend had asked me to help her with a class presentation. She wanted me to conduct a smudging ceremony while she shared her experience at a residential school as a child. Up to that point residential schools were something I read about and now I was listening to a survivor in person. The raw emotion that my friend shared touched me deeply and I saw in that class that was predominantly non-Indigenous that I was not the only one. When the lived experience comes off the page and you are able to experience it in person you cannot help but become changed in some way by such a profound moment.

My broader research explores conflict theory and how Indigenous and non-Indigenous society can move forward from settler colonialism with reciprocity, dignity and a mutual opportunities for growth and prosperity. The first step in that process is for the dominant side of the conflict to openly and honestly listen to the narratives of the other side of the conflict, very similar to a talking circle. This eight week

study shows that auto-ethnography is a proper way to share those lived experiences that have been lost in the margins of history.

In the development of this paper I have developed a relationship with the Mi'gmaq Wulstukwiuk Center (MWC) at the University of New Brunswick. David Perley, the Director of the MWC and First Nations Innovation, the research project who funded my study have made it possible for me to become involved in further research in this field. In the coming year I will be a part of a research project using ICT to assist the recovery and revitalization of Wabanaki languages.

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