

Alberta Doctors' Digest

The (dis)honor of the Crown

Every now and then I am asked to open an event and provide a treaty land acknowledgement. For a time, I would use the pre-prepared and approved land acknowledgement texts - lifeless, without room for any sense of subjective introspection or reflection and reeking of shallow symbolism. I did so obediently and without confrontation.

My permissiveness and passivity are the scar tissues I bear from colonialism – scars that I struggle to bring feeling back into every day.

In any case, as time wore on, I became overwhelmed by a tide of discomfort and resentment about the carelessness and superficiality of the exercise itself. And so, I took it upon myself to think and reflect on the meaning of the treaties themselves, the protracted history of the oft-deadly struggle for the implementation of treaty obligations, and my role – as a Nehiyaw iskwêw – to keep the spirit and intent of the treaties alive in all that I do.

When I acknowledge the land and treaties now, I speak subjectively. I acknowledge that I am a guest on this traditional territory now known as amiskwaciy-wâskahikan. I acknowledge that I was brought here by colonialism and stolen from my mother, and my traditional territory of Treaty No. 4, more than 40 years ago. And I acknowledge that as a guest on these lands, I am responsible and accountable to respecting the treaty and to advancing the needs and protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples who have lived here since time immemorial.



"If you ask the average non-Indigenous Canadian what they believe to be the purpose and intent of the treaties, you will likely be met with silence." - Tibetha Kemble (Stonechild). (Photo credit: Marvin Polis)

Above all, I hold myself accountable for keeping the treaty alive. Because, you see, treaties have no tidy expiry date. Treaties are living things. They were, and are, intended to detail how settlers and Indigenous peoples are to co-exist peacefully forever; for as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the rivers flow.

I don't get asked to do land acknowledgements that much anymore.

But that's how I keep my side of the street.

On the other hand, If you ask the average Canadian what they believe to be the purpose and intent of the Treaties, you will likely be met with silence. Or, you will hear people describe how treaties are a thing of the past – now shapeless, overtaken by the relentless pursuit of capitalist progress. Rarely will you hear a non-Indigenous person speak of their sacred responsibility to ensure they are upholding the treaty that gives them the land and resources they need to keep on thriving. And perhaps that was the intent after all. To forget.

But as I continue to bear witness to the ever-rising tide of inequities that are disproportionately endured by Indigenous peoples, I am compelled, now more than ever, to examine just how far we have strayed from the treaties that were intended to permit us both, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, to thrive, as opposed to merely survive. But if history has taught us anything, and as our current status and social location attests, we've strayed in unimaginable ways. Indeed, while we were both intended to benefit, it is unmistakable that Kanata reaps an imbalance of what was supposed to be shared.

Having spent the bulk of my professional career working with and for Indigenous peoples, it should come as no surprise that I know the texts of the numbered treaties that cover more than 50% of what is now known as Kanata. It should also come as no surprise that I also know the unwritten parts too: the oral history of the treaty-making process; the words and stories of our ancestors who, long ago, were making sure we had what we needed to go on living.

While the settler state will assert that it is only obliged to the written parts of the treaty, and to interpreting the scope and depth of their obligations as they see fit, we, however, know that our ancestors asked for, and agreed to, more. We know they asked for and agreed to lifelong education, not merely teachers and schools. We know they asked for and agreed to the protection of our health and medicines, not medicine chests and Indian Agents. We know they asked for and agreed to land and resources required to participate and thrive in the years ahead, not hand ploughs and unworkable, resource-barren land. We know our ancestors asked for protection and assistance, not violence and erasure.

We know. We remember.

And as I step back and am confronted by the brutality of our current outcomes in health, education, justice, child welfare, and language and culture – I am made breathless with awe at the survivance and enduring hearts of Indigenous peoples to keep on living. To have survived and thrived as a people despite centuries of colonialism, without full

implementation of our treaties, is undeniably awe-inspiring. Our collective ability to pass on the history and knowledge of the treaty from one generation to the next – of respecting it and remembering it – is how we continue to hold ourselves, each other, and the settler state accountable to our sacred relationship. It's how we keep our side of the street.

But Kanata does it differently.

Even though the state makes vapid attempts to memorialize its role in the treaty-making process as majestic and respectable, how Kanata continues to keep its side of the street is inescapable. The disastrously poor outcomes endured by Indigenous peoples that are evident across all social systems is precisely how Kanata chooses to hold itself accountable.

Kanata will tell you everything is alright – that there is no relationship more important than the one it has with Indigenous peoples. And it will conveniently pathologize Indigenous peoples to avoid accountability for its abject failure to implement its own treaty obligations, manifesting most acutely in the health outcomes among Indigenous peoples. And it is important to be clear here: the disproportionate levels of chronic disease, infant and maternal mortality, poverty-related illnesses (i.e. TB), malnutrition, and the 17-year gap in life expectancy, to name only a few – these are not inherent.

These are manufactured outcomes of how Kanata keeps its side of the street. This is the (dis)honor of the Crown.

Banner image: Treaty 4 pictograph drawn by Chief Paskwa in 1874