Body, Place, and Story – Who am I Doing Philosophy with Indigenous Peoples?

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Introduction

This text is a personal account of my experiences with Indigenous peoples and communities in Canada over the last 25 years. I am very grateful for this book and the opportunity it offers to reflect on the intricacies between knowledge and power – workings I have felt since my early school days. In my work as philosopher, I often rely on phenomenological approaches that are bound to concrete life experiences. Yet, when I write "philosophical" texts that have to stand the test of rigorous academic procedures, I can rarely allow myself to be guided by my intuition, the knowledge of my body or deeper layers of experience. This is not to say that "checks and balances" in the academe are not important. Also here, in this book, we included a peer review process (even if it is on a smaller scale with "just" the editors reviewing). The question however is, who or what structural, historical, or cultural presumptions lay the foundation for the guiding principles and criteria of such procedures? Who decides for what reasons what is "worth" to be published?

According to phenomenological principles, I will develop my thoughts on the entanglements of knowledge and power based on my experience. It will be a personal account of becoming a "philosopher,"[1] and more particular a philosopher who is (com)passionate about doing philosophy with Indigenous peoples. Saying that still comes with a lot of doubt and hesitation – for many reasons, two stand out: My own life story of becoming a "knowing person", even an "intellectual," and my experiences with Indigenous peoples in Canada. I have the feeling that both are interrelated. Yet, I find myself hesitant to draw the lines too quickly as I cannot compare my situation to the traumatic history of colonial suppression and violence of Indigenous peoples. Who am I to feel drawn to and in a very subtle, yet profound way close

1 Writing these lines in English, I find myself feeling awkward not to be able to write "Philosoph*in*". It has never really occurred to me before. There is something about being a "woman philosopher" that has – I gather – a lot to do with my way of becoming a "philosopher" questioning my abilities and skills.

to my Indigenous colleagues and friends? Both lines of experience will guide this text.

Moreover, the question "who am I" has at least two different connotations: First, a rather critical one, who am *I* as a white woman and academic who has been trained in the European tradition desiring to learn more about and dialogue with Native American thought? Everything along the lines of cultural appropriation, questioning my motivation, wokeness and political correctness belongs here.[2] The second implication emphasises the "am" on a very existential level. It refers to a number of experiences which touched on my being, which changed me as a person. It deals with a number of deep doubts, with the limits of dialogue, and the limits of being understood. It traces down some of the undercurrents of unconscious motivations of my own biography as well as the heavy burden of a colonial past and present I have been feeling ever since I had the chance to be with Indigenous peoples.

As I said, I am grateful for the opportunity to uncover and better understand the sometimes diffuse and hazy emotions when I am in intercultural spaces, when I write or teach about Indigenous philosophies and when I converse with Native colleagues and friends. I sense that this conscious practice of "self-care and truth-telling" is necessary to better understand what "knowledge," "participation," and the "power of discourse" mean and hence to create a finer sense for epistemic injustices.

Thus, my text has three parts, all of which look at the connection between power and knowledge: In the beginning, I will reflect on my bumpy road of becoming "an academic." Secondly, I will draw from key experiences with Indigenous peoples – experiences that helped me to grasp or "know" things without being able to (rationally) understand or even explain them. Thirdly, I will look at some of the critical demands that come with a growing sensitivity to injustices, privileges, and power differences in the academic, and more particular, philosophical world. Here, the concept of telling the truth (Greek *pharresia*) could be helpful as it is also a political term challenging the power of discourse as well as the power of a certain kind of knowledge.

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2 It is significant to note that many of the terms used in the context of minority rights have a turbulent history and can be harnessed to many different, often problematic wagons. Yet, they came from a place of marginalization and suppression and thus convey an important message in its original meaning. Often, they were captured and distorted in pejorative and sarcastic ways. "Identity politics" for example is a term coined by the *Combahee River Collective*, a Black feminist lesbian group who stated that their strength to face oppression needs to come from their own identity, because nobody else cares. "Woke", too, comes from African American groups who demanded a vigilant and sensitive attitude ("stay woke!") when it comes to racism or sexism as well as social inequalities. The meaning of a word is its use in a language (Wittgenstein) – it lies in what language does. The terms mentioned here are full of tension and always in danger to be (mis-)used by all kinds of political camps, and to fall into negative extremes, although they carry important messages.

1. Struggling to be also someone who "knows"

In *Indigegogy*, the book the Cree Scholar Stan Wilson invited me to be part of, he uses a metaphor describing his experience of learning how to use the tools of Western science: "I feel much like I am in a birch bark canoe on the open ocean at night trying my best to keep from being swamped and then dragged along in the monstrous wake of the passing great ship *American Hegemony*."[3] Although I come from this great big ship Stan talks about (or at least its European tradition), I felt so close to him in his flimsy canoe. I wasn't very good in school, in fact my first school years were marked by massive self-doubt, the feeling that everyone else in my class could do, understand, and know everything better than me. I probably did not fit to what the German school system considered valuable – at least not when it comes to performances that show in grades. The experience of not being able to keep up, of not having the prerequisites to be part of the group who is "good" or even "very good," led to an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness. It was a troublesome experience to be caught on that big iron ship without the ability to escape its logic. I ended up at the "Hauptschule," the lowest stream of the quite competitive school system in Germany. I already mentioned it in the introduction: I can by no means compare my feeling of powerlessness within the normative constraints every educational system brings about with the brutality of an educational system that deliberately set out to "kill the Indian in the child." At least my "ship" was safe, quite to the contrary of Stan's fragile canoe.

I remember that it was one sentence that changed everything for me. It came from my teacher in grade 5, an older man who seemed to have seen more in me than other teachers before and myself. It was simple and yet so very powerful, he just said: "You are not stupid." It was as if someone really thought that I have the capacity to keep up with my peers, to even be good in all the things that I was supposed to know – and it turned out that I actually was.

However, it wasn't "good enough" to enter university. Thus, I "had" to study social work first to gain the credentials needed to access the "real" academic world. This first degree brought me to Canada where I conducted my social work practicum working with juvenile sex offenders in open custody. Most of them were Indigenous (although only about 5% of the population are First Nations, Métis, or Inuit).[4] Soon

3 Wilson, Stan/Schellhammer, Barbara: Indigegogy. An Invitation to Learning in a Relational Way, Darmstadt 2021, 71.

4 There are a number of problems with the term "Indigenous". It encompasses a wide range of very diverse cultural groups and diminishes their diversity in tradition, language, and geographical region. Moreover, it stems from the Latin *indi-gena* ("inside" and "born") and defines peoples in relation to their colonizers, it thus is a colonial term. Other words like "Aboriginal" are not less problematic – the prefix "ab-" carries a negative connotation as in "*ab*normal". The Canadian constitution (of 1982, section 35) considers three Indigenous groups: First Na-

I learned about the horrific colonial past which is still very much alive in today's Canada. I wanted to know more about the connection between cultural loss(es) and the overwhelming psycho-social suffering I experienced.[5] This was the beginning of the doctoral research for my PhD in philosophy.

2. Who am I who wants to know?

For that I offered my services as a social worker to the Inuvialuit (Inuit living in the Western region of the Canadian Arctic called Northwest Territories) while at the same time disclosing that I would like to do research using Clifford Geertz' thick description. This approach seeks to just be with people in "the field" without any "methods" like questionnaires or other pre-scripted means of data collection. Culture, for Geertz, resembles a "web of significance" people create by living together at a certain time and a certain place. The analysis of it, Geertz explains, is not "an experiential science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning."[6] It seemed obvious to me that people being robbed of their culture and with it their significance lose the very ground they live on – in Canada they literally lost the land and soil their identity sprung from. It pained me that their incredible knowledge and creative skills to live in one of the most threatening environments on the earth seemed to become obsolete.

But even more than that, I experienced a jumble of feelings that I could hardly get sorted. Looking back many years later, I sense that at the heart of things stood a strong feeling of helplessness in midst of a lot of pain. I worked with a woman who just lost her husband to suicide, still being bruised from his last hitting her. Another woman shared with me, still shocked about herself, that she wounded her neighbor being drunk so much that this person had to be flown out to a hospital. I could tell many more stories of children hiding from their abusing parents or people freezing to death – stories that are horrific enough to feel desperate. However, my sense of helplessness came from a different place, it had to do with severely questioning my role in the community. I did not know who I was for the people and – what was even more daunting – I did not know how to express myself and how to connect with them. I was not Canadian, hence not directly related to what happened during the

tions, Metis, and Inuit. (Monchalin, Lisa: The Colonial Problem. An Indigenous Perspective on Crime and Injustice in Canada, Toronto 2016, 1 ff.)

5 With terms like "cultural genozide" and its main strategy to establish residential schools to "kill the Indian in the child" this connection becomes utterly clear. Since the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada the term "cultural genocide" has been officially used. (Summary of the TRC Report: https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf (16.11.2023), 1).

6 Geertz, Clifford: The Interpretation of Cultures, New York 1973, 5.

colonization of the Inuit. Yet, I was of course sticking out as this tall white woman representing "modernity," a "privileged elite," and "civilisation" – I was white in a racist context. I realised that my helplessness was not so much about the "knowledge" I was after, it was much more about knowing how to connect, how to gain trust. I longed for it, sometimes also feeling quite lonely, while at the same time questioning my intentions. Here again, one incidence changed a lot for me.

Together with a number of youth and an elder from the community Ulukhaktok, I went on a winter fishing trip. We were supposed to fish the supply for the winter. It was extremely cold on the sled, travelling for many hours over land and the ice-covered sea. Once we arrived, I realized that I had frozen one of my toes. After a quick inspection, the elder decided that I should go back to see a nurse and ordered two hunters to pass by on their way back to take me with them. It was obvious that they disliked the order very much. Their sleds were full of fish and animals, therefore I had to sit on the back seat of their skidoo. I felt extremely vulnerable and dependent while they were not speaking a single word with me. I don't know how long it took until we arrived in the community. The woman I worked with was already waiting for me. She helped me from the skidoo and brought me to the nursing station. She wrapped me in warm blankets and took off my boots. She gently took my bare foot and tucked it under her T-shirt to warm it against her belly, to my great protest. She calmed me down and explained that she had brought up three children and knew what to do in the event of frostbite. I did not know what to do, trusted her and let go. Not only did I feel the healing warmth for my feet, I was in contact, enjoying the impression of safety and closeness.

After a while of just being silent, I found myself sharing with her my troubles of not knowing how to connect and how embarrassed I felt that I had to be brought back to the community. She did not say much – if anything at all. But I got this very deep impression that she was listening. In my notes I wrote: "It was good to talk *with* her in this moment of complete exposure about the most pressing questions of my research – questions I usually only shared with my peers by talking *about* them (the Inuit)."[7] I was even able to share with her my uncomfortable feelings of representing the colonizer, feeling the heavy burden of what happened and with it all the horrible things also social workers had done to Indigenous peoples, e. g. taking away their children during the so called "Sixties Scoop"[8] arrogantly assuming that they know best what is good for their children. In these moments of vulnerability and deep

7 Schellhammer, Barbara: "Dichte Beschreibung" in der Arktis. Clifford Geertz und die Kulturrevolution der Inuit in Nordkanada, Bielefeld 2015, 264.

8 The "Sixties Scoop" refers to a period in which a series of policies were enacted in Canada that enabled child welfare authorities to take ("scoop up") Indigenous children from their families to place them in foster homes, from which they would be adopted by white families. Despite its name referencing the 1960s, it began in the mid-to-late 1950s and lasted into the 1980s.

connection, I gained so much more knowledge about living in the far North, than with everything else that I had learned before – all the factitious knowledge that gave me the wrong impression of power and control. I understood the elder's reservations of learnings that come from books when it comes to their relevance of living on and off the land. The land is teaching its inhabitants, for example, that it does not matter where you come from, but you need to be able to rely on each other to survive.

It was just recently that I realized how my attention shifted from an emotionally loaded sense of the injustices and injuries that have been done (it may have also been something like compassion or even pity that I am not proud of), to a strong desire to involve Indigenous thought in mainstream, "Western" philosophy pursuing to decolonize it. I am now eager to shift what is at the margins of philosophy to its center, and thus to question "philosophy" itself. In other words, my attention shifted from a state of shock, maybe even moral injury, from seeing victims and survivors of cultural genocide to the awareness of how important Indigenous philosophy is to face some of the most pressing problems of our today's world, for example with regards to theories of sustainability and environmental ethics or alternative juridical systems ("restorative justice") seeking to heal instead to punish. However, not being Indigenous myself, this created a different set of problems with regards to knowledge and power.

3. Knowing between a rock and a hard place

I have a number of non-Indigenous colleagues and friends in Canada who say that they would never touch anything that is related to Indigenous issues as it was too "hot," too much of a "mined terrain." I gather that socio-cultural sensitivities still seem to be rising, even after (or maybe also because of) the "Truth and Reconciliation Hearings"[9] that took place across the country. We experience a growing sensitivity here in Germany, too, e. g. questioning Karl May's projections of Native Americans including distorted representations of history while ignoring its colonial tragedies.[10]

9 The TRC was a result of the *Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement* and involved hearings across Canada in which Indigenous people shared what they had suffered through and in the aftermath of the "Indian Residential School System". The commission started its work in 2008 and presented its final report in 2015.

10 The literary scholar Hartmut Lutz coined the term "Indianthusiasts" to designate German enthusiasts for North American Indigenous peoples and their cultures. Most of the enthusiasm originates from Karl May's adventurous stories which are coming under increasing criticism, because they paint and reinforce a stereotypical and racist picture of Indigenous peoples – even if it is positive.

After Stan and I had finished our manuscript, we gave it to several people to read and comment on it. One of our Indigenous proof-readers warned us that the weaving of my thoughts into Stan's text could come across as white validation for Indigenous voice. And he added in a very assertive way that Stan would have his own voice. His comment hurt, it hit me on a very profound level. That was exactly *not* what I wanted, at the same time I was afraid that he may be right, and people could think that way. I was lost considering giving up the whole project and offered Stan to publish the book just with his words without mine. However, this was not an option for him, he wanted this to be a joint project, modeling how different cultures could come together, even after a very hurtful history. Still, I wondered what it is that I can say in midst of this sensitive atmosphere – or should I better say nothing at all? It felt like touching a wound that still takes a lot of time to heal. I realized that we probably cannot escape history or just look at it from the outside. The historical strings of harmful relationships are attached to us. I am entangled in them – with who I am, where I come from and what I represent. It hurt, because I felt misunderstood, and – what is even more difficult – I did not know what I could do about it. How can I write in such a way that it transports what I want to say – and that I can be sure, it does not reproduce colonial patterns? I probably can't. What I put on paper becomes a life of its own. What we say changes its meaning in the process of getting heard.

Yet it doesn't seem to be helpful either when white academics start to whine and feel sorry for themselves. During an online conference on co-creative research with Indigenous peoples, somebody mentioned that this whole talk of white researchers about their self-doubt is just another way of bringing *their* issues in the foreground, it is just another form of epistemic arrogance.[11] Once more, I wondered what it was that I can say.

I learn a lot from Stan in these things. His gentle and unexcited way to deal with sheer racism as well as with exaggerated political correctness often brought me down and out of my emotional carousel. Some time ago I wrote a text in which I started by pointing out my privileges (what seems to be one of the "should's" for white academics) – Stan just asked how I would know that I am privileged? He did not say it, but I got his point by thinking that he may also insinuate that I am suggesting that he isn't. In a different text I quoted (without knowing) a queer "pretendian" (short for: pretend to be Indian). An Indigenous woman who read my first draft was very clear in saying: "Don't quote this person!" I fully understood why she got so upset. Pretending to be Indigenous seems to be the most all-encompassing form of cul-

11 This reminds of Robin DiAngelo's (2018) analysis in *White Fragility* that it is difficult for white people to see what they cannot see as white people, that it is simply not possible for them to experience what "people of colour" experience. Yet, particularly white people who think that they are liberal, "left", super-reflected, responsive, etc. are enforcing persistent forms of systemic racism.

tural appropriation. Somewhat similar was my experience of receiving a peer review comment for a text that I had written about Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth*.[12] Her book touched me deeply, particularly with regards to my relationship with nature, the nature that I am, and with something a number of Indigenous authors call "sovereign erotics." The reviewer's critique was that I would come across as "a white woman going Inuk [. . .], which was much critiqued and parodied for its New Ageists ideas and practices of appropriation of Indigenous cultures."[13] I talked with Stan about it – he wasn't quite as clear about this issue by simply stating that culture can be learned – it even *has* to be learned, that is the very nature of culture. What is morally wrong about people being drawn to Indigenous ways, he asked, practicing them respectfully and involving them into their lives? We emailed back and forth asking us where the line is between the necessary respect for minority groups and "too much of the good," to much political correctness, e. g. when comes the point when land acknowledgements at the beginning of a meeting turn into an empty phrase, in a "thin" formula that lost its "thick" meaning? What gets lost in the translation of traditional knowledge and practices – especially when they move from an oral tradition to text, from a living entity to a list that can be checked off? Traditionally, protocols made sure that any knowledge passed on would be living.

This may bring me back to the question: Who am I? What is my intention of writing, following certain protocols and trying to be sensitive to this space between myself and another culture? The Cree scholar Margaret Kovach talks about the importance of a "good heart" and a "good mind" from which writers are able to convey a positive spirit in their words.[14] To ask ourselves who and where we are when we write or do intercultural philosophy with Indigenous people, to check for whom or what we are writing for, is imperative to maneuver through the many shoals and currents of epistemic violence.

Here, I find the Greek concept of *pharresia* helpful. It means to speak the truth, to get real with regards to all the things that move us including all our less glorious motives like the desire for recognition, to be a knowledgeable person, to show how incredibly morally reflected one is and so on.[15] However, telling the truth is not just a practice of honest self-exploration and frank self-expression, it is also a political practice which is necessary to encounter unequal relationships between power and knowledge, to fight epistemic injustices. Although not everything went well during

12 Tagaq, Tanja: Split Tooth, Toronto 2019.

13 Peer Review 1 of Schellhammer, Barbara: Reading "Split Tooth" – Lessons of the Sovereign Erotic I take away and still grapple with, in: Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien (ZKS), 43 (2023) 73, 94–107.

14 Kovach, Margaret: Indigenous Methodologies. Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts, Toronto 2009, 7.

15 I mostly refer here to Michel Foucault's *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres: le courage de la verité*. The course he taught at the Collège de France from 1982–83.

the "Truth and Reconciliation Hearings,"[16] it gave Indigenous people the chance to tell the truth about their experiences being stripped off their culture. It confronted the rest of Canada with the bare brutality of colonization.

I guess I will not stop to write or to teach Indigenous philosophy. However, I will also never come to an end asking myself who I am and why I do what I do. Thus, I will continue this wavering learning journey. It gives me a lot of hope that Alice Keewatin suggests in the foreword of our book that "words are not exclusionary" as "spirit is not bound by language or culture, it travels through pure hearts."[17] I asked Stan if he can teach me to paddle with him in his canoe. Before I jump from *Hegemony* into the open ocean, he suggests, I should make sure to see an Indigenous craft available for the rescue.[18] Indeed, I need people like Stan to help me find a way, even in uncomfortable places between a rock and a hard place. It is not me getting out of this, it is people like him or the women in Ulukhaktok accepting me, trusting me, giving me the impression that I am capable of learning from them.

16 Schellhammer, Barbara: Truth and Reconciliation in Kanada. Zur Bedeutung indigener Philosophietraditionen für die Heilung des kulturellen Genozids unter Ureinwohnern, in: polylog. Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren 42 (2019), 61–73.

17 Keewatin, Alice: Foreword "A doorway to the book", in: Wilson, Stan/Schellhammer, Barbara: Indigegogy, 17 f.

18 Wilson/Schellhammer: Indigegogy, 73.