

Land and Language Paper

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Abstract

This essay explores the significance of the language and the land Canada was built on. I will begin with describing my family history as well as naming my first language. Furthermore, in this essay, I will identify the language and the people whose land I live on today. The essay describes many of the crimes committed against Indigenous people since the beginning of colonialization to the present day such as the mere existence of residential schools or the disproportional violence against Indigenous women. Eventually, this essay explores ways how these problems can be solved through education and the heightened awareness of the general population.

Family History

As far as I was able to trace my family history back, all my ancestors are from Germany and therefore did not play a part in the historical colonialization of Canada. My family resides in different parts of Germany to the present day, which makes me the only member of my family, who lives in Canada. My ancestors on my mother's side are from East Prussia. The region was part of Germany until the End of World War II and was separated from the main part of the country by the so-called Polish corridor (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). At the end of World War II, my great-grandmother and my grandmother, like many other East-Prussians, had to flee from the Russian Army (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). Soon, East Prussia was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). The area where my family comes from is part of Russia today (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). While I was doing my research on the history of East Prussia, I discovered that Indigenous peoples from Prussia were colonized by Christians and therefore Christianized in the 14th century (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). The possibility that my ancestors were involved in colonialism centuries ago had never occurred to me before, and I was surprised by this new piece of information. I had always been convinced that since my family has not left Europe in the past to settle in colonies

overseas, colonialism was not part of my family history. The family on my father's side is from the western part of Germany, from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. This is also the place where I grew up. When I was ten, my mother and my siblings moved to Southern Germany, where I spent the next ten years of my life. Before I came to Canada, I started university in Freiburg, another city in Southern Germany. As my family on my mother's side has lost their home in East Prussia and has lived in many different places in Germany ever since, I do not have one single place I can call my home. Instead, there are various places I have different kinds of connections with. That is why I love travelling, and it was relatively easy for me to leave the country of my birth and call Canada one of my new homes.

My First Language

The first language of my ancestors is German. It is also the language that I speak to communicate with my family and is, therefore, my native language. Most members of my family speak English as a second language to varying degrees. Learning English in school is mandatory in Germany as English is currently the Lingua Franca, and very predominant and influential. Although the German language is not endangered by it, the massive influence of English, especially in terms of vocabulary, is striking. Moreover, my great-grandparents from East Prussia were fluent in Lithuanian as they lived close to the border to Lithuania. They spoke it whenever they did not want the children to understand what they were saying.

Cultural Genocide

Before I came to Canada, I was not consciously aware of the fact that the land I live on today was initially stolen from Indigenous peoples who have lived here for thousands of years and have preserved many traditions, a rich culture and many different languages (Monchalin, 2016). I did not think critically about English and French being spoken as official languages in Canada as I thought of it as a peaceful country with a relatively spotless past. Over this semester, I was given the important opportunity to learn about the crimes that were committed by the colonizers

against Indigenous peoples. Only one of these crimes is the mere existence of residential schools in the past that were meant to assimilate Indigenous children while they were still young, by forcing them to give up their language, culture and traditions (Monchalin, 2016). Many of the estimated 150,000 Indigenous children had to endure severe physical, sexual and mental abuse (Monchalin 2016). The last residential school closed only 23 years ago, in 1996 (Monchalin, 2016). Many forms of this cultural genocide are present in Canadian society and policies to the present day; however, in a more covert manner (Monchalin, 2016). For example, Indigenous children in foster care are still hugely overrepresented in the Canadian Welfare System (Yükselir & Annett, 2016). Moreover, there are still highly racist policies, such as the Indian Act in place (Monchalin, 2016). Additionally, the abuse of power by people in high positions, which is often directed against Indigenous women, for example, by the RCMP, has never stopped (Monchalin, 2016). We also have to debunk many more prejudices as they discredit Indigenous people and the trauma they have gone through and still do (Szalavitz, 2016). One of the most persistent prejudices is the untrue assumption that Indigenous people are more susceptible to alcoholism (Szalavitz, 2016). However, on average, the general Canadian population drinks more alcohol than Indigenous people living in their communities (Monchalin, 2016, pp.155). Knowing about these and many more crimes that were committed against Indigenous peoples made me perceive this country differently. I do recognize now that neither English is the language of this land, nor does this land belong to anyone but its Indigenous peoples. Instead, English and French are the languages that were imposed by the colonizers and are the official languages of “Canada” to the present day. (Monchalin, 2016). Although no members of my family played an active part in the historical colonization of Canada, it is important for me and other recent immigrants to recognize the role they play in contemporary colonialism merely by being a part of Canadian society and the dominant colonialist culture.

The Language and the Land I live on

I have done research to identify the language that belongs to the land I currently live on and found out that my house is located on the land of the Katzie, where the language Halkomelem was originally spoken (Native Land, 2015). Halkomelem belongs to the Salishan languages and is the language of various Indigenous peoples on the coast of British Columbia (Yinka Dèné Language Institute, 2006). The language is split into three dialect groups which are the upriver group, the downriver group and the island group (Yinka Dèné Language Institute, 2006). The Katzie belong to the downriver group as do the Musqueam, Kwantlen and Tsawwassen (Yinka Dèné Language Institute, 2006).

Ways to resolve the Issue

For non-Indigenous people, it is important to know who they are and where they come from to realize that the land they live on does not belong to them or their ancestors, but that it was forcibly taken from Indigenous peoples. The Numbered Treaties are only one example of how negotiations with Indigenous leaders were disregarded (Monchalin, 2016). Many of the things that were orally discussed during these negotiations were not written down in the treaty documents (Monchalin, 2016). Indigenous peoples never surrendered their lands but merely agreed to share it with settlers (Monchalin, 2016). Moreover, many of the points that were orally discussed during these negotiations, including promises made to Indigenous leaders, were never written down in the treaty documents (Monchalin, p.93). During further negotiations, promises regarding free education for Indigenous people “as long as the sun shines above and the water flows in the ocean” (as cited in Monchalin, p. 17) were made by the British crown but were never fulfilled (Monchalin, 2016). Coming to this realization helps immigrants to pay respect to Indigenous communities and to be more aware of the unjust circumstances and crimes this country was built on. On the other hand, being aware of their identity and knowing their origin is important for Indigenous people to preserve or re-establish their traditions, culture and

language (Corntassel & Alfred, 2005).

I have always been interested in language, as it is a powerful instrument that is easily underestimated. Language can be used as a tool of oppression and colonialization, as you can see from the issues that the Indigenous peoples of Canada are still facing today. On the other hand, it can also be used to reverse these effects. By learning at least a few words of the language of the land, non-indigenous people can show their respect and compassion and deepen their understanding of all issues regarding Indigenous rights and injustice against these peoples. For Indigenous people, reconnecting with one's language, land and the teachings of their ancestors can be a significant step to heal from trauma and to regain autonomous lives independent from the colonizers, including western diet and lifestyle (Corntassel & Alfred, 2005, p.613). I am planning to become an educator for linguistics and teach the importance of language to my future students. I will teach the importance of language for one's identity and for showing respect. It is important that we never stop making an effort to learn about the land we live on and its people and listen to the truths of Indigenous peoples. People need to understand their pain and trauma but should also look beyond that. Nobody should assume this is the only thing they have experienced, as there is so much more to being Indigenous. Two texts that we read in class provide an insight into this cultural richness. In the first text "Women and Water," Indigenous author Kim Andersen (2010) gives the reader important information about the great significance of water in Indigenous communities and for all life. Another text that was written by Buck (2010) addresses the topic of astronomy in Indigenous cultures and explores different stories that explain the constellations in the sky. We also learned about Indigenous science and natural remedies that help against diseases such as cancer (Hwang, 2017). The dominant Canadian society needs to understand that only because Indigenous beliefs, culture or science differ from the dominant equivalents; it does not mean that their knowledge is less valuable. Instead, people need to acknowledge it as equally important. It is important to avoid the colonial point of view and therefore distance ourselves from Eurocentric ideals. Instead, we need to take

action by constantly being critical of the things we hear and not simply adapt to the predominant world view of the colonizers. This applies to general prejudices held up by the public as well as to academia. For example, it is essential to be critical about research articles regarding Indigenous peoples and to always be aware of the background of the author, whether the person is Indigenous, supportive of Indigenous rights or whether the author represents a Eurocentric point of view.

Conclusion

As this essay illustrates, the importance of language and the land regarding the issues that Indigenous peoples are facing in Canada today is unmistakable. Colonialism is still omnipresent in Canadian society, and we still have a long way to go. However, the education of the general public is the key. The more people know about these issues, the better they can engage themselves, and the more they will respect the Indigenous languages and the land they live on as well as Indigenous communities and their rights and culture.

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