

**Truthing:  
An ontology of living an ethic of *shakihî*<sup>1</sup> (love) and *ikkimapiiyipitsiin* (sanctified  
kindness<sup>2</sup>)**

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I remember the exact day when I received the email inviting me to participate on a panel speaking to the notion of “post-truth,” and how perplexed I was by the idea that we, in Canada, might be post-truth or that truth might be dead (Scherer, 2017). Post-truth is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionary, 2016), thus meaning that facts are deemed less important or even irrelevant. The day I received the email was sunny and warm and I was at the park with my dog. I took a few extra laps that afternoon, mulling over what this post-truth might mean and the implications this might have on me, as a Michif-Métis woman, and main stream education system. A scroll of questions began to flow through my mind as I tried to align the meaning of post-truth and my own understanding of truth as a process of coming to know. I first questioned: *When did truth become a noun, not a verb—an ontological orientation to the world?* And further, *when did truth become something that is fixed, and we acquire, something that can be consumed?* I stopped mid-stride and wondered *whose truths are being referred to in post-truth exactly?* And, *whose truths are being deemed irrelevant?* At this time in Canada, it seems the *truth* of a history of genocide and the continuation of settler-colonialism has yet to have a deep impact on the consciousness of Canadian society.<sup>3</sup> I was therefore troubled by this notion that we are post-truth. Thinking about the history and presence of Michif people, the claiming of a post-truth era is yet another move to colonize and oppress the truths of myself, my community, and of all Indigenous people in Canada (see Tuck & Yang, 2012). Nullifying and placating the facts—for example, dismissing the abuse in Residential Schools, not acknowledging the forced removal of people from the land, and ignoring institutional and personal racism—continues to erase our experiences, bodies, and stories from what is now called Canada.

Colonialization consumes Indigenous experiences, bodies, and histories so they become invisible and non-existent. Jack Forbes’ (2009) provocative book, *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wetiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism*, relays the notion of cannibalism to the atrocities of colonialism, and I use his theory of the *wetiko disease* to discuss the notion of truth and truthing. In what follows, I first use outline Forbes’ (2008) theorizing of

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<sup>1</sup> Michif language

<sup>2</sup> I would like to acknowledge the teachings of Piikani Elder, Dr. Reg Crowshoe and his continued generosity in sharing his teachings with me. The teachings I have learned from Reg are through oral learning in the presence of smudge.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the recent court decisions that acquitted the killers of Colten Boushie and Tina Fontaine.

the *wetiko psychosis*, then illustrate truthing as an ontology, and conclude with a discussion of what is at stake for our education systems if we do not honour truth as an ontological orientation.

### Wetiko Psychosis

Through his examination of imperialism, greed, violence, and exploitation, Jack Forbes (2008) offers a different perspective to understand behaviours that have led to and uphold atrocities in our society. Forbes (2008) relies on the concept of the *wetiko* to describe our current state of humanity: “*Wetiko* is a Cree term (*windigo* in Ojibway, *wintiko* in Powhatan) which refers to a cannibal or, more specifically, to an evil person or spirit who terrorizes other creatures by means of terrible acts, including cannibalism” (p. 24). Cannibalism is the “consuming of another’s life for one’s own purpose or profit” (Forbes, 2008, p. 24), and does not include a spiritual exchange or purpose behind the consumption. It can sometimes be “carried out in an ugly and brutal manner” (p. 25) for self-fulfillment, gratification, consumption, and greed. Forbes (2008) asserts that “*imperialism and exploitation are forms of cannibalism and, in fact, are precisely those forms of cannibalism which are most diabolical and evil*” (p. 24, italics original). Leanne Simpson (2013) describes:

Wiindigoo [as] a kind of monster who is always hungry, and, no matter what Wiindigoo eats, she never feels full....Some people say that the problem is that they have a lot of want inside of them, and their want is always growing bigger and bigger. (p. 46)

For the *wetiko*, their insatiable appetite is never appeased and more importantly, there is no ethical boundary to which they abide.

The *wetiko psychosis* is birthed from the idea that to unethically consume another’s life for self-fulfilling purposes relies on the belief that others do not have a spirit or life (Forbes, 2008). He uses Paulo Freire’s (2009) notion of dehumanization but suggests that Friere (2009) does not go far enough in his theorizing to include the more-than-human beings—cosmos, earth, water, and animals—all of creation. To dehumanize or rid all creation of spirit justifies the continued extraction and exploitation of resources. Piikani Elder, Dr. Reg Crowshoe, asserts that the system of colonization has and continues to deny us of our existence (University of Calgary, 2018). The denying of existence includes all of creation, and all life forces that allow humans to live well on this earth. Because *wetiko psychosis* denies the life of humans and more-than-humans, Forbes (2008) refers to it as a spiritual sickness or “a sickness of the soul or the spirit” (p. 173). This sickness is evident in the commodification and consumption of the earth (capitalism/consumerism), women<sup>4</sup> (patriarchy), knowledge<sup>5</sup> (education systems), children<sup>6</sup> (child welfare), and even identity.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See the Missing and Murdered Women and Girls, <http://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/>

<sup>5</sup> See Paulo Friere (2009), the banking system and the commodification of knowledge

<sup>6</sup> See Friedland (2018)

<sup>7</sup> See Gaudry & Leroux (2007), for their discussion on the consumption of Métis identity in Canada.

The problem with *wetiko psychosis* is the belief on part of the *wetiko* “that he has a right to use another human being (or his property) in a manner which is decidedly one-sided and disadvantageous to the victim” (Forbes, 2008, p. 42). This sickness entails acts of deceit: “lying is almost always a factor in *wetiko* behaviour, and in fact may represent a key strand in the entire epidemiology of *wetikoism*” (p. 43). To suggest a post-truth is certainly a symptom of *wetiko* behaviour and as I have asserted a move to further erase truths of genocide and settler colonialism.

### Truthing as ontology

When I was asked to partake in the panel, I asked Piikani Elder Reg Crowshoe how *truth* would be translated in Blackfoot. He interpreted it to mean *omanii* – meaning “real spirit talk” which invokes a sense of responsibility to be truthful (Reg Crowshoe, personal communication, May 2017). A Métis Elder also translated truth from her Michif perspective to *tapwe*, meaning “inner truth,” a truth or knowing from within which is connected to your spirit. In orientating myself to “truth” by locating how the concept is defined from within Indigenous languages, it was clear that truth is a *process* that is connected to spirit. Truth is an ontological process—an enactment in which we live out every day of our lives.

Learning from Elder Reg Crowshoe in an oral model and using the model in my own pedagogy, the truthing process is a crucial part of validating our knowing. Truthing in an oral model of learning is not solely an individual process, but a collective endeavour wherein we share our experiences to help ourselves and others understand more deeply an event or experience (Little Bear, 2000; Maracle, 2015). The truthing process is predicated on the enactment of protocols that allow us to form and develop enriched relationships. These protocols must encase a deep ethical dimension. One such protocol is the smudge—a process of lighting medicine (e.g., sage or sweet grass)—as a way to connect us to Creator thus requiring us to engage ethically with our words. The smudge governs the learning circle with the principle of *ikkimapiiyipitsiin* (“sanctified kindness”), which requires kindness for all beings (Reg Crowshoe, personal communication, June 2018), responsibility (Christensen & Poupart, 2013; Graveline, 1998), and being connected to all beings (Deloria, 1999; Ermine, 1995; Ghost Keeper 2007; Holmes, 2000; Meyer 2013). Through the principle of sanctified kindness, we are obliged to honour the life of all beings. Even the smallest blade of grass deserves love and respect. The invocation of smudging is about humility and honesty, therefore, when we are engaging in spirit-to-spirit relationships there is an ethicality to not cause harm.

Smudge requires that we speak our truth to the Creator and to all beings that are present with us in the circle. We are responsible for our words that come only from our direct experiences. N. Scott Momaday (1997) affirms, “When one ventures to speak, when he utters a prayer or tells a story, he is dealing with forces that are supernatural and irresistible. He assumes great risks and responsibilities” (p. 16). If we heed this warning that our words do have the ability to create and destroy, *what does this mean for truth and truthing in our classrooms? How does this call us to be better relatives to all beings?*

Smudge requires a connection to and relationship with the earth in which there is an ethical process for gathering the medicines of sage and sweetgrass. Before we can smudge, there

is a truthing process that must occur between the plant and me. I need to ask for permission to harvest the medicines for my use. Embedded in this type of ethical harvest is the belief that all beings have a life force and require us to behave in a way that honours the life that we are being gifted (Kimmerer, 2012). Excluding the ethical dimension that honours the animacy of all beings established through the process of asking permission to take a life, we are committing cannibalism, the sickness of the *wetiko*.

In our learning circles, self-policing is crucial in maintaining spirit-spirit relationships. The principle of self-policing instills an ethic of self-awareness that promotes a care-filled way of living. As an inherent part of the ethical dimension of truthing, self-policing promotes the internalization of acceptable moral behaviours thus making humans as their own law enforcers to ensure the well-being of all is maintained (Little Bear, 2000). Through this, humans become attuned to how our behaviours might impact other beings. Through self-policing we are responsible to and for our actions which guides us to orientate ourselves and our actions through *shakihi* (love) and *ikkimapiiyipitsiin* (sanctified kindness).

The truthing process is living through loving relationships with all beings. Truthing is not just about words, but about nurturing and fulfilling ethical relationships with humans and more-than-humans. This has deep implications for how educators move through and within our classrooms. Imperialism has wreaked havoc on bodies, hearts, and spirits. Re-imagining curricular landscapes cannot solely come from our minds because we cannot intellectualize a truthing process. To re-imagine curricular landscapes all of our being—mind, body, and spirit in relationship with all of creation—must be included. These good relations are how we will create a better future.

### **What is at Stake: Infection of the Wetiko**

The question is: *What is at stake?* If we do not re-center our whole being in education systems the *wetiko disease* will continue to spread because the disease, the sickness “is a very contagious and rapidly spreading disease. It is spread by the *wetikos* themselves as they recruit or corrupt others” (Forbes, 2008, p. 49). What is at stake if we do not reorient ourselves to our curricular landscapes and pathways that honour the life force of all beings and live in such a way that allows all beings to thrive? Humans will continue to lose the connection to ourselves, to each other, to all of creation, and risk being overcome by spiritual sickness. Forbes (2008) stresses that to heal from the *wetiko psychosis*, from the strangulation of our spirit, we must engage in a process of “spiritual regeneration” (p. 173). Spiritual regeneration reminds me of the words of Maniluni Meyer (2008), “Land/aina, defined as ‘that which feeds,’ is the everything to our sense of love, joy, and nourishment. Land is our mother. This is not a metaphor” (p. 4). Meyer (2008) asserts that our first teachings about love come through our connection to the earth, thus our relationship with “that which feeds” (p. 4) is at the heart of what will regenerate spirit-spirit relationships. The task of acknowledging all kin cannot be a task that is only held within the walls of our school systems. Instead this task needs to be embedded in the very fabric of our daily lived experiences. Truth, therefore, is not dead, but is alive through our living out ethically bounded relationships that honour all life. Instead of acknowledging post-truth politics, education ought to honour the spirit in all interactions and relationships—truthing not only the past, but also how the past has deep implications on the present and the imaging of a future

where all beings thrive and flourish. We are not post-truth; rather, we are in a time where truth and truthing are desperately needed in our education systems. Truthing as an ontology needs us to (re)image how to be a good relative, one that is grounded in living an ethic of *shakihi* (love) and *ikkimapiiyipitsiin* (sanctified kindness).

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