

## “Is It Too Late to Decolonize?”

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*“Colonization,” and “colonialism.”*

These are dreaded words that ring throughout Turtle Island—a place that most non-Indigenous people refer to as North America. However, for the majority of people presently living on Turtle Island, colonization is considered a good thing—without it, they would not be living here today. Indeed, the destructive aftershocks of colonization are rarely addressed, and the people affected have hardly been considered. Like the forests, the Indigenous population needed to be cut down in order for the destiny of the colonizers to be manifested. However, this paper is not meant to demonize the current generation for the horrors of generations past.

Instead, I raise the question: Is it too late to decolonize?

The word “decolonization” indeed carries moral weight, perhaps more so than the word “colonization.” However, decolonization is something that is easier said than done, and the window of opportunity to do so may have already been sealed. However, I believe there is a way for First Nation peoples to survive and thrive in this Post-Colonial World. It is through modifying their education and thought.

Jeff Corntassel asks the question: What does it even mean to be Indigenous today?<sup>1</sup> He states that being Indigenous today involves “struggling to reclaim and regenerate one’s relational, place-based existence by challenging the ongoing, destructive forces of colonization.”<sup>2</sup> If true, our very existence—qua indigenous people—is an open defiance to the present colonial system.

In light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Corntassel writes that reconciliation is simply not what should be strived for. Reconciliation is, he states, too “commonly invoked by colonial entities to divert attention away from deep decolonizing movements and push us towards a state agenda of co-optation and assimilation.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Corntassel writes that to simply “forgive and forget” is not the right way to go about decolonization.<sup>4</sup> That is, how does one forgive genocide, and further, how does one forget it?

Though it is good that Reconciliation is brought up in our current education system, we should ask: Why stop there? Reconciliation implies that whatever injustice was committed is in the past—and is not happening today. Turning to the 2016 protests at Standing Rock—where several First Nations people stood against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline—it is undeniable that injustice continues. Accordingly, Reconciliation is not what is needed for First Nations people to prosper.

Corntassel offers another term: Resurgence. This word refers to the “community-centered actions premised on reconnecting with land, culture and community.”<sup>5</sup> Put another way, the focus of First Nations education should be on its own perspective and history. For example, how the relationship between the First Nations

<sup>1</sup> Jeff Corntassel, “Re-envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012), 86-101.

<sup>2</sup> Corntassel, Re-envisioning Resurgence,” 88.

<sup>3</sup> Corntassel, Re-envisioning Resurgence,” 91.

<sup>4</sup> Corntassel, Re-envisioning Resurgence,” 91.

<sup>5</sup> Corntassel, Re-envisioning Resurgence,” 92.

individual and the land they walk upon is the way it is.

The secondary school I attended—Kahnawake Survival School—taught history from a Mohawk perspective. Thus, a plethora of events that occurred Pre-Contact were told. Rather than start our history at Settler arrival, I learned about how the Peacemaker and Hiawatha worked to end the war of Five Nations and unite the people under the Great Law of Peace. Instead of starting the story of First Nations people at genocide and systematic oppression—a state of decline—I learned first of how my people managed to unite, and form the Rotinohsonni Confederacy. I later learned that my non-Indigenous colleagues learned only of genocide and residential schools, and not the history I learned. From my peers, I learned that many current educational systems present First Nations people as broken.

Although it may be too late to fully decolonize, a notion worth taking seriously—another suggestion for survival—would be to allow First Nations to have control over their own education.

As mentioned in Barry M. Montour's, *Education for the Seventh Generation: A First Nations School Reform Model*, the Indian Act required that First Nations education be a federal responsibility.<sup>6</sup> This clearly was ineffective. Montour provides census data from the Department of Indian Affairs—presently known as Indigenous and Northern Affairs, following the election of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau—which states that “the graduation rate ranged from 29.0% to 35.5% . . . for the time period from 1996 to 2003.”<sup>7</sup> Evidently, there is a

problem with the relationship between Indigenous students and their educational system.

A call for reform is justified.

Montour cites Michael Mendelson's proposition of the First Nations Education Authority Act, which would remove federal responsibility and allow Indigenous people to control their education.<sup>8</sup>

### Or is it too late?

Montour emphasizes the importance of an education act that is designed by First Nations people—that is, “if it is to succeed and meet the diverse needs of Aboriginal communities.”<sup>9</sup>

Looking ahead should be the primary focus of First Nations decolonizing. Seeds need to be planted now for future Indigenous people to reap. Montour states the pertinence of First Nations youth having an education that “is both comparable and transferable to the provinces.”<sup>10</sup> That said, if we are to have control over our own educational system, then it must also be recognized as being legitimate by the surrounding provinces.

The concept of “Seven Generations” is to consider what impact our actions today will have on those seven generations ahead.<sup>11</sup> That is, what sort of world do we want to leave behind? Given that it takes years for policies and acts to be ratified and put into action, it is important that our “plants” grow in the right direction.

Or is it too late?

This question keeps arising in my mind—it may be either a pessimistic thought, or a realistic one, but—*is it too late to decolonize?* Are we so far into this imperialized structure of society that we cannot turn back? Centuries have past, and I cannot say I am sure there is a single Indigenous

<sup>6</sup> Barry M. Montour, *Education for the Seventh Generation: A First Nations School Reform Model* (PhD diss., McGill University, 2010): 71.

<sup>7</sup> Montour, *Education for the Seventh Generation*, 71.

<sup>8</sup> Montour, *Education for the Seventh Generation*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> Montour, *Education for the Seventh Generation*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Montour, *Education for the Seventh Generation*, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Montour, *Education for the Seventh Generation*, 86.

person left on Turtle Island that has known life without systematic oppression. Has the damage been so great that we may never see a world where First Nations people are not herded onto reservations? Why bother changing it now? Why inconvenience the majority population? Changing the status quo may prove to be greatly inconvenient, but why should that warrant inaction?

It seems the current education system is too focused on the misfortunes of Native People—with the center of attention being on the terror and aftershocks of residential schools. This gives the impression that First Nations people are today broken. It is this type of damage-centered narratives that put Indigenous students like myself in uncomfortable situations—because we are not broken, and are in no need of pity. An example of resurgence and reformed education—that the provincial education systems can follow—can be seen at any three of the Kahnawake Education Center schools.

In the Kahnawake Education Center's document, "Kahnawake Education Center Annual General Assembly: Director of Education Report," a new curriculum framework is introduced. Titled "Tsi Niionkwarihò:ten," the framework is geared toward infusing traditional teachings and philosophies into the curriculum, which may serve as a method of decolonizing First Nations' education. "Tsi Niionkwarihò:ten" is comprised of nine elements, all of which revolve around the guiding principles of Rotinonhsión:ni worldview.

To explain, these guiding principles stem from, but are not limited to, the Rotinonhsión:ni peoples' creation story, ceremonies, and the Kaianerehkó:wa—the Great Law of Peace. The

program considers Indigenous ways of knowing. It provides strategies for passing on knowledge. These guiding principles can be infused across all

subject areas. Similar to the Quebec Education Program, the Kahnawake Education Center's

framework touches on oral, reading, and writing competencies. However, the content students learn are, among others, the Creation Story, the Kaianerehkó:wa, or Wampum Belts.<sup>12</sup> This type of educational and cultural infusion may be the key to First Nations' decolonization and survival.

To build a better future, there needs to be an education system that does not discourage or put Indigenous students at a disadvantage. For Indigenous students, it is important that they learn all that is necessary to thrive in a Post-Colonial world, and that includes learning their culture, history, and traditions. As the Kahnawake Education Center is doing, so too should other education systems find a way to infuse First Nations content into their curriculum. It is important that students across Turtle Island learn not only of the horrible things that have happened—or to stop at reconciliation. They must, instead, aim for resurgence. To learn of the beauty and the culture.

Students need to know that pity and good intentions are not enough to right injustice.

In 2020, nearly four years after originally writing this paper, it has become apparent that my initial question has been answered. The world that Indigenous people once knew, a free world, is beyond their reach, at the moment. To decolonize in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, hundreds of years after the Indigenous Apocalypse, is impractical.

The solution now is not simply to survive in this new reality, but also to find a way to live and thrive. This is not to say that we should assimilate

**We are not broken, and are in no need of pity.**

<sup>12</sup> Kahnawake Education Center, *Kahnawake Education Center Annual General Assembly: Director of Education Report* (201-2017).

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and lose ourselves, but to define what a 21<sup>st</sup> century Indigenous person is. To the youth, I encourage that they pursue higher education, to find a path to harmony for themselves and their people. Systemic change is not an overnight process. One day we will be free.