

Journeying back: understanding, reclamation and recovery through research with Indigenous people

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Abstract

Like that of other people of Newfoundland Mi'kmaq descent, my Indigenous ancestry was stigmatized and largely hidden by my family through my childhood. Through my research with Indigenous elders, beginning with the Inuit-Metis of Southern Labrador, I began to realize that stigmatization and the use of denial as a coping strategy was a common experience in Indigenous Canada. Here, I go beyond locating myself in the text to begin what Robert Nash calls a scholarly personal narrative (2004) rooted in my experience as a person of Mi'kmaq descent in modern day Newfoundland. As a researcher, I encountered people who modeled reclamation and recovery. This research also gave me many opportunities to contextualize Indigenous cultural loss. Through the Labrador research and other research with Indigenous people in Quebec, Ontario, and Nova Scotia I gained an intimate knowledge of Indigenous coping mechanisms and strategies and the deep Indigenous commitment to cultural values, mores, and practices.

Introduction

Trine Dahl (as cited in Arnold, 2011) argues that “academic writers leave traces of themselves in their writing which may be linked to national as well as disciplinary culture” (p. 67). Josie Arnold (2011) points to the self as a source of data and argues that it is inevitable that the self will become involved in the production of academic knowledge. Indeed, he states that if we unpack academic texts, we see them as “sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical” (p. 3). These are good descriptions of my experience as an academic researcher and writer and as a person of Indigenous descent. Here I offer the beginning of what Robert Nash (2004) calls a “scholarly personal narrative” in which a writer explores some aspect of his or her personal life with reference to the academic literature. While Nash effectively advocates for a new genre, recognizing the liberation element of telling and retelling stories, others such as Jane Gallop (2002) urge that we locate ourselves in our texts since reality is socially constructed. Though others do not go as far as Nash, there is an increasing understanding of the benefits to the academy of “self-reflection, observation and analysis” (Arnold, 2011, p. 72).

Several years after I graduated from the London School of Economics, I received a call from the manager of the Labrador Inuit-Metis Nation (LMN, now NunatuKavut Community Council or NCC), the political organization of the Inuit-Metis or Southern Inuit of Labrador. I was a newspaper columnist, writing the biweekly *A Second Thought*, which appeared in the St. John's *Telegram* and the St. Anthony *Northern Pen*. I had interviewed the LMN's president, Todd Russell, for one of my columns. The Metis, as they were mostly called then, were protesting the granting

of an outfitters license to an affluent Newfoundland businessman on the Eagle River, a salmon-rich stream of water that was sacred to Indigenous people. The Inuit-Metis wanted the license revoked and government funding provided to establish an Inuit-Metis Cultural Centre on the river. Inuit-Metis elders had been arrested for occupying the site and the RCMP had claimed someone had taken shots at one of their helicopters. (The police later apologized, admitting this was a fabrication.)

The story of the Eagle River was a classic tale of New World colonialism, taking place right here in Newfoundland where there was and remains a blanket of silence about settler culpability. In Newfoundland, there is a cultural emphasis on sameness and a minimization of differences. These features are rooted in the need to avoid conflict as cooperation was essential for survival. People lived in small coves dispersed along an 11,000 mile coastline with a harsh climate and unyielding soil, very unlike the arable land of Southern England and Ireland, from where many of the settlers came. Extended families fished together throughout the long summer; this meant that women had to live with the knowledge that they could lose their husbands, sons, and fathers in a sudden storm. A kind of “we’re all in it together” notion was woven into the settler culture. But this is not the experience of history, of everyone who calls the island or Labrador home.

For the LMN, I would be doing research on Indigenous knowledge and liaising with the coastal communities on the NATO low-level military flying that was being conducted from the air base at Goose Bay. The international struggle against the thousands of annual sorties by German, British and Italian pilots by the Innu is well-known. It culminated in Innu occupations of the runways and the arrests and imprisonment of their leaders. The Inuit-Metis, however, had mixed feelings about low-level flying. I would sort through all this and work with the Innu, the Labrador Inuit of the North Coast, scientists, and military representatives, all of whom made up the new Institute for Environmental Monitoring and Research.

I wrote in my column that the LMN’s protest on the Eagle River would go down in history as the awakening of the Labrador Inuit-Metis. It was also an awakening for me as a person of Indigenous descent. I had been raised in St. John’s, the island’s capital city in the 1970s, my father’s family having been refugees from the weak rural economy. In terms of identity inculcation, the schooling of Newfoundlanders of my generation featured pan-North Americanism but we did study European history and we had to sign a petition congratulating Queen Elizabeth II on her 25th jubilee. Newfoundland celebrated the 25th anniversary of its union with Canada around the same time and I vaguely remember a song we were taught in honour of this occasion. We had foggy ideas about our ancestors having come over from Ireland and England a long time ago. We learned – erroneously -- that the Mi’kmaq were brought over from Nova Scotia by the French to kill off the

Beothuk, who were much lamented. There were “no Indians left on the island” but there were in Saskatchewan and, in grade six, some of them became our pen-pals.¹

It was confusing because I knew I was part Mi’kmaq. But I didn’t know a lot about it and can’t recall verbalizing it in school. This might be because I knew that Mi’kmaq wasn’t a “good” thing to be. This awareness began when my family was on a South Coast beach when my younger and very dark-skinned brother was called a “jackatar.” The derogatory nature of the word was obvious but I did not understand its meaning and my father was reluctant to tell me. Finally, he said, “It’s someone from the West Coast of the island.” Genetically, I soon learned, we were jackatars: people of mixed Mi’kmaq and French descent, most of whom did indeed live on the island’s West Coast. Now everything else made sense and the unspoken was exposed and given meaning: the long black plaits of my great-aunt Rachel, the “Indian” slurs that people in my father’s home community made about my great-uncle, the chocolate eyes of my brother, our inky hair colour, that mysterious sense of shame that was already part of our fibre as children.

Indeed, as I intuited as a child, Mi’kmaq social identity was a negative experience. Acting Chief Ellie Edmonds reported, “As a young child I recall being made fun of and called a ‘savage’ because we were Mi’kmaq” (Federation of Newfoundland Indians, n.d., ca 2006; <http://qalipu.ca/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/2011sept-Elder-Stories.pdf>). Mi’kmaq responded to the stigma surrounding them by hiding their ethnicity as best they could (Federation of Newfoundland Indians, n.d., ca 2006; <http://qalipu.ca/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/2011sept-Elder-Stories.pdf>). Mi’kmaq parents found that denial of Indigenous ancestry was the most effective way to protect Mi’kmaq children and secure what employment was available, although even these drastic strategies did not always work at the paper mills in Corner Brook and Grand Falls.

As a coping mechanism, secrecy became pervasive. Mi’kmaq woman Annie Randall said, “One of the greatest kept secrets in Newfoundland history is that there are Indians in Newfoundland” (Federation of Newfoundland Indians, n.d., ca 2006; <http://qalipu.ca/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/2011sept-Elder-Stories.pdf>). This strategy extended to Indigenous people throughout North America and beyond. A Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq explained:

When I was growing up, there was so much discrimination; you didn’t dare mention the word Micmac. I never told a soul. My husband died and he didn’t even know who I was. I even changed my name so nobody would know (Berry, 1999, pp. 17-18).

¹ Besides the Indigenous history of the province, the French, Jewish, Lebanese, and Chinese history of Newfoundland were also absent. There was no notion of the province as a multicultural site. This has slowly begun to change; for instance, in 1987, Alison Kahn wrote *Listen While I Tell You: A Story of the Jews of St. Johns, Newfoundland*; this was followed in 1992 by Priscilla Doel’s *Port o’ call: Memories of the Portuguese White Fleet in St. John’s, Newfoundland*; and, more recently, in provincial government policy, such as the Immigration Strategy.

Another Indigenous informant described the pervasive sense of shame he felt while growing up, with the result that “I didn’t teach my children to be proud. Now my oldest son won’t admit his Native ancestry. I lost that” (1999, p. 18). For many Mi’kmaq social identity was eroded and a sense of attachment to the Mi’kmaq nation severed.

By the time I began my work with the LMN, my great-aunt Rachel, an expert in Mi’kmaq medicine, was dead. My grandmother, Angela, who was of English stock but knew every obscure branch of our family tree was long dead. So was my father who had researched his family history. But now, my work with the LMN gave me a route to the semi-hidden Indigenous side of my ancestry. I felt a sense of loss because my Mi’kmaq ancestors were the people who tied me to the land I lived on. My European ancestors had left their homelands and I hardly knew the places they came from.

Many of the European ancestors of the Inuit-Metis had come from the British Isles but agricultural skills would not keep them alive in Labrador. They had to become Inuit, like the women they married. They had to learn to hunt caribou, build sod huts, trap salmon in nets, drive dog teams, and kill seals on ice pans. Their children spoke English mostly and many learned to read from family Bibles but they lived Inuit lives and married each other. These social and economic adaptations led to the development of an Inuit-Metis culture, with its emphasis on pragmatism, independence, and sharing. This culture is eloquently documented in the writings of Lydia Campbell, writing in the 1890s, and, in the 1970s, by Elizabeth Goudie, the author of *Woman of Labrador*. Meanwhile, a scan through the two centuries of literature in which Campbell and Goudie’s people appear, reveals that they were known as “breeds”, “half-breeds”, “Natives”, “Eskimos”, and “settlers”, depending on the writer, the time and the place.

Like the Mi’kmaq (and so many other Fourth World peoples), many of the Inuit-Metis denied or hid their Indigenous ancestry, as best they could. At least that is one way to look at it. In the oft-repeated words of LMN President Todd Russell, they “didn’t shout it from the rooftops because [we] didn’t have to. Now we do.” In other words, as industrial development proceeded in Labrador, beginning with World War II, they became politicized with their politicization focused on their Indigenous identity. Working with them, I began to speak openly of my own mixed European-Indigenous heritage, feeling for the first time that I had a right to this heritage. I allowed myself to feel the loss of it and to try to make up for it through learning and reclamation.

For the LMN, President Russell and I traveled the coast in a small open boat; alongside us were schools of porpoises (a traditional Inuit-Metis food). I interviewed elders from Paradise River, Domino, Square Islands (a summer fishing station), Charlottetown, William’s Harbour, St. Lewis, Mary’s Harbour, and Cartwright. Their stories reflected Inuit-Metis land-use and occupancy; they told of tracking animals for food and being able to tell where the animals were. They also told of making gear to catch fish and moving inland in winter into the woods, the

Indigenous practice of seasonal transhumance. They recalled hungry nights especially in spring, harvesting and steeping bog bean for the sick, picking “puff plants” to ease babies’ diaper rash and so on. These are all Indigenous practices, demonstrating deep knowledge and longstanding tenure, as well as an Indigenous world-view that has remained largely intact in the digital era. I began to see my own relatives in their stories; my stories and theirs began to collapse. I told this to the elders, who were interested; because of the commonalities, it had meaning for them. We realized simultaneously and together that much of the Indigenous experience is universal: coping mechanisms and strategies, the sense of loss, the commitment to culture, especially cultural values, and cultural persistence, even in the face of massive social, economic, and technological change.

The work with the Labrador Metis Nation was, for me, the beginning of many research and related projects with and for Indigenous organizations and governments. These projects focused on land claims, and health and education policy. I was a member of LMN’s land claims team and did land claims research planning for the Migmag Mawiomis Secretariat of Quebec. Through this encounter I learned of the striking parallels between the histories of the Quebec Migmag and the Newfoundland Mi’kmaq. The Quebec Government’s position was that the Migmag were brought over from New Brunswick—after the French settlers had arrived and were established. This position mirrors the Government of Newfoundland position, which was first articulated by Premier Brian Peckford who was quoted in the *St. John's Evening Telegram* in 1987 as saying, "The Micmac people were no more aboriginal to the island of Newfoundland than were the Peckfords, who came here in 1791" (Jason Sylvester Benwah, Mi’kmaq History and People, http://www.benoitfirstnation.ca/mikmaw_article35_december.html). This position is well integrated into Quebec settler mythology, entrenching settlers’ sense of entitlement to land ownership. It frames the settlers as the only legitimate inheritors of the land and the First Nations people as outsiders and interlopers, effectively negating their Aboriginal land rights.

After Labrador, I worked with the Six Nations of the Grand River on health policy and was on the reserve the day the last Tuscarora speaker died. The loss of language that is pervasive in Indigenous Canada is rooted in many factors, including residential schooling, church missionizing and changes in communications technology. In an officially bilingual country, Indigenous language loss is invisible, even to Indigenous people, who might find it too painful to deal with. The Mi’kmaq language, which contains a vast vocabulary and is soft to the ear (*wela’lin* means thank you, for instance), is almost extinct in Newfoundland.

In Nova Scotia, my research for Acadia First Nation brought me together with people who had been uprooted from their homes in a 1950s government effort to centralize them. There were similar resettlement programs in this province which, I believe, affected Indigenous people disproportionately. I worked with Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq who had been kidnapped as children – some as young as five years old – and placed in residential schools. There they would suffer multiple losses from

language to sexual abuse, the repercussions of which continue to be felt through Indigenous families and communities across Canada. Some of these people modelled how to cope with loss, reclaim cultural identities, and cultivate resilience.

I worked on education policy in the Inuit communities of Labrador's coast and was there the day the Nunatsiavut Government was created in spite of the effects of residential schools, forced resettlement, and the near erasure of Inuktitut. The Nunatsiavut Government remains a living example of cultural survival and adaptation. As with any government born of colonial processes, the Nunatsiavut Government resulted from a flawed land claim settlement. But the very fact of the Nunatsiavut Government made people proud -- and no longer ashamed-- to be Inuit, which is significant, given colonial history. In the Innu communities I saw how colonial policies, including those related to education, continue to try and invalidate Innu world-views and ideas. The school system, for instance, was an important tool in forcing the Innu to become sedentary, settling in villages year-round and almost eliminating *nutshimit*, spring and fall trips to the country: home. But few societies are as resilient as that of the Innu. Innu-eimun, the language of the Innu, remains the first language of virtually all the Mushuau Innu, for instance. This is almost a unique situation in Canada where less than a handful of Indigenous languages are healthy.

Cultural identity is complex, particularly in the case of Indigenous and other racialized cultural identities. Examining a positive shift in the Black experience in the United States, Cross (1978) proposed four stages of racial identity: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization, which he correlated to self-esteem. These stages were tested with African-Americans and not with the Newfoundland Mi'kmaq, who have been the subject of few academic studies (Parham and Helms, 1985). In spite of this, the concept of cultural identity as a process, as suggested by Cross, usefully frames 'racial' or cultural identity as shifting, moving and changing. As Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002) assert, "'racial identity' is not a matter of individual choice" but the result of "constrained structural parameters" (p. 352). Confronted with persistent racism, the Newfoundland Mi'kmaq were forced into a pre-encounter phase, sometimes for generations, in which they compartmentalized their culture. More colloquially, this might be described as keeping it "at bay".

Another typology was developed by James A. Banks (1976) around the same time. Banks' model, aimed at educators, included six stages. It is important to note that Banks himself is an African-American living in the modern day United States and he would have lived much of what he researches and writes about. During the first stage, ethnic psychological captivity, individuals have internalized the negative stereotypes aimed at them by the larger society. They feel shame. In the second stage, ethnic encapsulation, people feel defensive about their culture and threatened by the dominant culture that surrounds them. In the colonial and post-colonial period, most Newfoundland Mi'kmaq would have been in one or both of these two stages. Today more people are in the third stage, ethnic identity clarification, in which they begin to reinforce their emerging cultural identity. People may or may

not progress to the other stages: biethnicity (a strong sense of one's own culture and an understanding of others), multiculturalism and reflective nationalism, and, finally, globalism and global competency.

In his study of Indigenous cultural identity in Canada, Berry (1999) acknowledges how Indigenous identity is compromised (as African-American identity is in the United States). Indigenous people might choose to attach to or detach from an Indigenous group, feel positive or negative about being Indigenous, and conceal or demonstrate one's Indigenous identity (Berry, 1999). These choices are determined, at least to a degree, by external social factors, such as enduring racism and discrimination: historically, the Roman Catholic Church's active discouragement of the Mi'kmaq language and, latterly, accusations of inauthenticity and fraudulence in response to settlers' perceptions of Indigenous privilege. Berry describes something of the Indigenous experience in post-colonial Canada; "many (Indigenous people) are 'conflicted' or inconsistent in the sense that individuals don't know who they really are, or they have incompatible ideas and feelings about themselves" (p.6).

The stages described by Cross (1978) and the choices identified by Berry (1999) are not discrete and are not part of a linear progression. Mohawk artist Greg Staats alluded to this during his 2011 visit to Memorial University's Grenfell Campus. He advised members of Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation to use their status cards to get tax exemptions in department stores "on a good day but not on a bad day" when negative reactions might hurt more. For Staats, choosing not to demonstrate cultural affiliation, even if it meant not exercising Indigenous treaty rights, was part of self-care. In the long term, Staats implied, self-care was important to the preservation of Indigenous cultural identities.

To answer a question posed by the editors of this journal, what traits was I now bringing out of hiding and into the light? Shame was one, buoyed by a heightened sense of privacy and even secrecy. Slowly, the shame began to fall away, though not steadily because, as we've seen, external social factors continue to force choice-making about cultural identity on a regular basis. In this way, I was leaving Banks' (1976) ethnic psychological captivity and ethnic encapsulation stages and becoming immersed in the ethnic identity clarification stage. A trait I brought into the light was my deep attachment to the land, the South Coast barrens and Labrador tundra in particular, the places shorn of trees and people, the places where caribou quietly pad through moss. Another trait was my long-held inherent reaction against the individualism of North America. My father taught me that the community matters more than the individual and that our 'job', as it were, is to contribute to the community. For all my father's talk of education, there was little mention of what it could do for me as an individual. There was, instead, the Indigenous imperative to serve the community, not individual ambition. Today I see this same commitment in many of the Indigenous students. This commitment to community is counter-cultural in North America, much more so than at first glance and it bears some thought.

Bringing all this to the surface, where it belonged, put me out of step with my fellow Newfoundlanders and began an inevitable process of cultural disengagement, given the significant differences between the Newfoundland cultural lens and the Indigenous cultural lens. The response to ecological problems is one example. Innu and Mi'kmaq do not frame hunting as a right that people have over animals. It is the animals' land (as well as the people's land). Animal behaviour is not problematized in Indigenous discourse. Thus, Innu and Mi'kmaq do not form organizations that call for moose or seal culls because these animals have "taken over the highways" or are "eating all our fish," as per Newfoundland public discourse. The Newfoundland cultural framework reflected Judeo-Christian concepts like man's dominion over animals. A surprisingly proportion of First Nations cultural mores persist, albeit in various and sometimes altered forms, despite the lengthy colonial period. Like many people of Indigenous descent, I learned these relational values from my father and my other older relatives; I just didn't identify or name them as Mi'kmaq but now I am able to do so.

I acknowledge that, because I do not look Indigenous, white privilege is part of my daily life and of my "story", to use Arnold's (2011, p. 3) term. As someone who is at least partly culturally disengaged, however, there is another layer in my experience. Daily, I face the challenge of living and working among Newfoundlanders, considering them to be my people, but feeling not quite one of them. Newfoundlanders frequently point to the alleged injustice of the 1960s Churchill Falls hydro-electric development and they usually assume the same rights to Muskrat Falls, which is square in the middle of Indigenous Labrador land. I see these issues through an Indigenous lens, not a Newfoundland/settler/colonial lens and thus my view is in direct opposition to the dominant views. I have to remind myself that this dominant view is people's long-held and largely unchallenged world-view and, most importantly, that it has meaning for them. Describing North American settler orientations such as this one, Chickasaw Elder and educator Eber Hampton said at the 2012 Indigenizing the Academy conference in British Columbia, "It's all they have". When these worldviews are informed by Judeo-Christian religious traditions, as is the case in the Newfoundland context, these views represent people's "best knowledge," Eber explained. This framework is a way to understand the dominant and potentially harmful world views of the larger society.

The Federation of Newfoundland Indians concluded a 40 year struggle for recognition with the formation of Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation in 2011². Today, young children, including my daughter, are growing up taking part in public Mi'kmaq events, including drumming and powwows. They seem to have only positive associations with their Mi'kmaq ancestry. Parents like me are making a point of passing on the few Mi'kmaq words we know. Among these words is *kitpu*

² There are 24,000 members of the band. Despite media reports of more than 100,000 applicants/members, the federal government virtually ceased admissions in 2012 with the result that a not insignificant number of legitimate applicants will be refused membership and thus, status under the *Indian Act*. Again, this division of nations into status and non-status Indians is a familiar story across Canada.

or eagle; there are few words more important than this one because First Nations people believe the eagle is the bird whose wings touch the face of the Creator.

Thus, when external factors –in the form of racism, exclusion, and colonial government policies--conspire, identity is compromised and becomes inconsistent. In spite of the persistence of these factors, Indigenous identity and people's emotional attachment to their Indigenous identity has survived. As I gradually reclaim my own personal identity, I am doing this against the background of a claiming of a broader cultural identity. This story is hardly unique to this province as Indigenous identity all over the Fourth World has been eroded through similar patterns described here. But the collective reclamation represents a significant milestone for Newfoundland and Labrador and through it lies the potential for healing and liberation for us all.

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