Chapter 6
Peace like a Red River: Indigenous Human Rights for Decolonising Reconciliation

Jeffrey Ansloos

Abstract One of the great ethical complexities of peacebuilding in postcolonial contexts is the meaning of reconciliation for Indigenous people. Historically in Canada, supposed 'peace' has been brokered with Indigenous people in ways that ultimately have increased colonial oppression. Critical Indigenous scholarship is therefore concerned with the ethics that guide peacebuilding. The United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People serves as leverage for promoting Indigenous paradigms, frameworks, and ways of being as the normative ethical sphere for building peace. In this chapter the author will demonstrate that when Indigenous frames of reference are treated as the normative ethical sphere for building peace in colonial contexts, the moral vision of human rights is thickened. The author explores how, by elevating the unique values of a First Nation peace perspective, Indigenous ways of being can simultaneously promote Indigenous cultural reconciliation and nonviolent activism for transformative justice. Finally, in this chapter, the author presents the implications of Indigenous psychologies of nonviolence for policy and practice.

Keywords Indigenous human rights · Critical indigenous ethics · Decolonising · Reconciliation · Canada

6.1 Narrative Introduction

My name is Jeffrey Ansloos. I am the son of Sherry and Paul Ansloos. I am Nehiyaw (Cree) from Fisher River Cree Nation, and grew up in Treaty 1 territory near the fork of the Assiniboine and Red River in Winnipeg. My mother is a survivor of the

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1960s Scoop,[1] *and my Grandmother is a survivor of the Canadian residential school system.*

In my early years, I felt that I had to hide that I was Indigenous. I struggled with shame for the intergenerational legacies of racism in my own family. I recognised my own survival of colonial abuses, as well as how many of the people I loved, like family, church members, and even, friends, were perpetrators of colonial violence. I struggled to reconcile what it means to hold the many realities of the intergenerational legacies of residential schools and the 1960s scoop. I sensed my disconnection from Indigenous traditions and languages, and the simultaneous marginalisation of my indigeneity in colonial and Christian traditions.

Things began to shift for me in my early teens as I began to re-establish connections to my Indigenous roots. Through a process of reconciliation, my mother and I were reunited with my Indigenous Grandmother. I began volunteering in Indigenous community programmes focused on Indigenous youth. I eventually began to study Indigenous perspectives on violence, colonisation, our language, and our spirituality. Over the years, I have learned that as I participate in ceremonies, honour my relations, and live our stories, my healing has continued.

Currently there are many issues facing Indigenous people, as we continue to face neo-colonial aggression in Canadian society. Every year across Canada, we fish the bodies of missing murdered Indigenous women out of our rivers. We have more Indigenous children in foster care then ever before in history. Our youth are more likely to go to jail than finish school. In almost every social sphere, we find indicators of ongoing colonial oppression. And while peacebuilding is entirely relevant to a discussion of Indigenous human rights, it is a notion that also needs critical attention and also needs to be articulated from an Indigenous lens.

There is a song the Christians have taught me which has the lyrics, "I've got peace like a river in my soul." While I do believe that the time for a new relationship characterised by the dignity of human rights is needed in Canada, I believe that the river of peace must be red. We need peace like a red river. We need to understand what peace means from our perspective as an oppressed people, and, how our Indigenous traditions inform our engagement in this work.

6.2 Peace for Whom? The Challenge of Indigenous-Settler Reconciliation in Canada

In 2008, following decades of political advocacy by Indigenous community members and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), the federal Government of Canada issued a formal apology to First Nations people for sanctioning the

[1]The 1960s Scoop is a period of Canadian assimilationist child welfare policy, which disproportionately relocated indigenous children to nonindigenous families throughout Canada and abroad (Sinclair 2007).

administration of Indian residential schools. Prime Minister Stephen Harper called for a national truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) to establish public understanding of the experience of the residential schools, as a first step towards a new relationship of truth and respect between First Nations people and Canadians.

Within one year of this apology and the initiation of the commission, this same prime minister during a G20 event in the United States said, "Canada has no history of colonisation. So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great powers but none of the things that threaten or bother them" (*Reuters* 2009). In 2012, while the government continued its financial cuts and denied critical residential school records to the TRC, a movement of Indigenous activism referred to as #IDLENOMORE began. Led by a group of Indigenous women, #IDLENOMORE organised events across the country, including a hunger strike by Chief Teresa Spence, drawing national attention to the obligations of Indigenous treaties and raising alarm around the worsening conditions of her Indigenous community. This movement was largely characterised as an "Indian question" by national media (*Toronto Sun* 2014).

In 2013, the UN Special Rapporteur to Canada regarding the status of Indigenous people also documented the deteriorating conditions and broken relationship between the federal government and Indigenous people. The report reads:

> Canada faces a continuing crisis when it comes to the situation of Indigenous peoples of the country. The well-being gap between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in Canada has not narrowed over the last several years, treaty and aboriginal claims remain persistently unresolved, Indigenous women and girls remain vulnerable to abuse, and overall there appear to be high levels of distrust among Indigenous peoples towards government at both the federal and provincial levels (United Nations 2014: 20).

In 2015, during the release of the formal report of the truth and reconciliation commission, which heard thousands of hours of survivor testimony confirming the participation of the Canadian government in actions tantamount to cultural genocide, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs refused to acknowledge the recommendation by Chief Justice Sinclair, for a national inquiry into the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women (*Macleans* 2015).

The government believes that Canada is in the era of reconciliation. While the peaceable flourishing of all Indigenous people and Canadians is a laudable goal, critical Indigenous scholarship is actively deconstructing the contemporary political discourse of reconciliation in Canada. The political rhetoric of a peaceable relationship with the government appears to be simply that, all talk and no action. It appears that reconciliation has been abstracted for the purposes of national assimilation and to pacify socio-political resistance.

Paulette Regan, Director of Research for the TRC, provides a critical analysis of reconciliation politics, challenging what she refers to as "the peacemaker myth that goes to the heart of settler identity" in Canadian politics. Regan (2010: 14) suggests that a number of the historical frameworks of settlement and peacemaking in Canada are present in the renewed emphasis on reconciliation, and "despite talk of healing and reconciliation, [they] remain rooted in patterns of colonial violence".

She writes that, “reconciliation must profoundly disturb a dominant cultural history and mindset that misrecognises and disrespects the oral histories, cultures, and legal traditions of Indigenous peoples, including their histories of peace making” (Regan 2010: 14).

Indigenous paradigms need to be elevated. The ethical lens that guides “building peace” needs to be an Indigenous one for the just actualisation of reconciliation within Indigenous-Settler relations. The TRC (2015: 259) similarly affirms that “Reconciliation will be difficult to achieve until Indigenous Peoples’ traditions for uncovering truth and enhancing reconciliation are embraced as an essential part of the ongoing process of truth determination, dispute resolution, and reconciliation”.

6.3 Indigenous Human Rights and Indigenous Resurgence

The ethical discourse of peace and conflict transformation has frequently been situated in the framework of human rights. While there are many peace traditions, in the contemporary age, human rights have become the ‘*common phrase’* for various diverse traditions. Ideologically, many invested in building peace believe that human rights enshrine the inherent dignity of persons that are undermined by all forms violence. The popularity of this paradigm is also in part due to its appeal as a legal framework. Human rights in international law have been effective as a legal mechanism for promoting issues of social justice throughout the world.

While civil rights often fail to be guaranteed in federal courts, human rights violations have a context for justice in International Courts. Additionally, human rights are valuable to peace-builders in part for their educative function on the nature of social conflict. In a context of colonial or gender based oppression, human rights law is a framework which brings about awareness of this lapse in justice. It also serves a teleological function by providing a social vision of human relations, albeit a thin one. In the context of peacebuilding, this thin moral framework is able to translate transnationally the ethical domain of nonviolence. Human rights, therefore, function in the contemporary age as a public discourse to promote flourishing in a shared future of particular social identities.

Human rights continue to be critiqued as idealist and not able to fully articulate the particular struggles of populations that are subjugated around the globe. In regards to Indigenous people, this gave rise to the almost unanimously affirmed United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP). Indigenous Rights are frequently misrepresented as a new set of rights special to Indigenous Peoples. Métis and legal scholar, Brenda Gunn clarifies that “the UNDRIP did not create new rights for Indigenous Peoples. It expanded upon and clarified the application of existing human rights standards to protect Indigenous peoples’ inherent rights. As a declaration the UNDRIP represents the dynamic development of international legal norms and reflects the commitment of states to move in certain directions, abiding by certain principles.” (Gunn 2015: 199). It is notable, that the four last countries to become signatories of the UNDRIP, Australia,

New Zealand, the United States and Canada, have some of the most widely documented violations of Indigenous Rights. Canada was the last signatory of the UNDRIP in 2010, and framed its affirmation as aspirational. Gunn points out that:

> The UNDRIP sets the floor for Indigenous people's rights, the minimum international human rights standards, not a ceiling…Because of the ongoing violation of Indigenous people's rights by colonial governments and other non-state actors, the starting point for the UNDRIP is the principles of equality and non-discrimination articulated in Article 1. The UNDRIP celebrates the distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples and provides protection for these differences, ensuring Indigenous peoples and their cultures the international legal framework to thrive (Gunn 2015: 199).

Fundamental to the UNDRIP is self-determination of Indigenous groups. This serves as a strategy for legally promoting the normative function of Indigenous ways of being. While the ongoing neo-colonialist realities continue to exclude, undermine, and marginalise Indigenous groups, the UNDRIP provides a mechanism for a legal challenge. The affirmation of the Indigenous human right to self-determination, while not inherently necessary, has helped to catalyse de-colonial Indigenous awakenings around the world and, in Canada, Indigenous governance scholar Alfred (2009a, b) refers to this as Indigenous Resurgence. Central to Alfred's approach is an emphasis on decolonisation through the assertion of Indigenous identity. Alfred (2009b) writes:

> The challenge for us seeking to move beyond mere survival, to engender social and political movements taking us to a place beyond colonialism is to convince Onkwehonwe to draw on our inherent and internal resources of strength and to channel them into forms of energy that are capable of engaging the forces that keep us tied to a colonial mentality and reality (179).

It is not simply enough to ask a colonialist government to back away or to reform such a society. This does not liberate Indigenous people, but maintains the status quo of colonial power structures. For Alfred, Indigenous resurgence is caught up in an internal shift of Indigenous consciousness and the actions that follow.

The following section explores the notion of peacebuilding from this lens and how the self-determination assured in Indigenous human rights helps us to decolonise the vision of reconciliation in our case of Turtle Island.

6.4 Towards Peace like a Red River

If reconciliation is to occur in Indigenous and Settler relationships, the notion of building peace must be strengthened by Indigenous frames of reference that account for the political complexities of neo-colonialism evident in the Canadian context. This transforms ethical conversations regarding building peace, to reflect the thickness of Indigenous ethical traditions, and their authority in light of a commitment to self-determination. The Indigenous peace psychologies explored here

articulate ways of being Indigenous that promote restored relationship with Settler Canadians by actively seeking justice for Indigenous people.

Canada Research Chair of Indigenous Social Work and Indigenous Knowledges, Hart (2002), explores medicine wheel teachings of *wholeness, balance, harmony* and *healing* as an Indigenous approach to helping in the psychosocial sphere. While Hart applies these teachings to the social work field, I have applied these teachings to the field of peace psychology (Ansloos 2014), suggesting that they constitute an Indigenous pacifism for contemporary Indigenous youth.

In the teaching of *wholeness*, Hart (2002) indicates "wholeness is the incorporation of all aspects of life and the giving of attention and energy in each aspect within ourselves and the universe around us" (40–41). As an Indigenous philosophy, wholeness emphasises the interconnectedness of all aspects of life. This is exactly what is eroded in the wake of colonial violence. In Hart's work, the suffering or symptoms of colonial violence cannot be isolated from their social or relational context. Hart's perspective can be taken further in that it incorporates a broader scope or context by which healing must emerge and occur.

Indigenous approaches to reconciliation between Settler and Indigenous people must be engaged in a way that strengthens the quality of relationships of communities. Wallace (2013) highlights that:

> In contrast to neoliberal peacebuilding models, which attach primary importance to state-centered processes, actors and institutions, grassroots social movements and local knowledges become that central focus and active agents in a conceptualisation of social transformation (29).

In decolonising reconciliation in Canada, we must evaluate how the rhetoric of federal apologies serves the promotion of *wholeness* for Indigenous people. For Hart, wholeness of a person both internally and in relationship to the broader context is the goal and, therefore, peacebuilding efforts on the part of Canadians must be committed to the holistic healing of Indigenous people. Political apologies may have some effect in terms of societal acknowledgement, but acknowledgement means very little to the health of Indigenous communities if the conditions of oppression remain the same within our communities. Wallace (2013) writes of:

> a worrisome lack of attention to referencing and grounding our peacebuilding theories and discourses to grassroots community-based locations and practices. As a consequence, the relationship between lived experience and theory formation becomes increasingly tenuous and decontextualised when, in fact, it needs to be firmly grounded in people's lives (196).

Reconciliation must flow from the whole of our communities. The whole of Indigenous life includes that which touches the *spiritual*, *emotional*, and *communal* (Ansloos 2014: 128). Within this framework the goal of making peace, or resolving a complex social conflict, requires that our conception of identity advance beyond simple individual renderings towards something that engages the whole—the dynamic and communal lives of all involved in the complex social conflict. As such, in as much as reconciliation includes the political discourse of apology, that

apology ought to engage settler Canadians in an awakening of consciousness around their identity as colonisers. For the teaching of *balance*, Hart (2002) emphasises:

> each part of the whole requires attention in a manner where one part is not focused upon to the detriment of the other parts… when a person is at peace within their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual humanness; with others in their family, community, and the nation; and with all other living things, including the earth and the natural world (41).

From Hart's perspective, the moral vision of Indigenous identity is one in which the healing of colonial violence cannot support the splintering of an individual or group of individuals at the cost of the wellbeing of others, including the relations of our natural and spiritual environment. As a paradigm for peacebuilding, this promotes a radical relational obligation. In the face of fractured Indigenous and Settler interactions, reconciliation becomes about more than simply amending our relationship interpersonally and must also engage in peaceful balance with our broader relations. Reconciliation must be ecologically balancing.

Colonial violence is indicative of a loss of balance. Efforts to restore balance are essential for decolonial peacebuilding practice. In the context of a society that has oppressed Indigenous ways of being or understanding the dynamic relationality of Indigenous identity, Indigenous peacebuilders and allies of Indigenous decolonised reconciliation, must reconstruct these relational pathways. Wallace (2013) suggests:

> [f]or Indigenous communities, enacting *power with* non-Indigenous activists involved asserting Anishinaabe histories, knowledges, processes, and priorities. At its deepest level, establishing a relationship of power with involved reconstructing a relationship of trust and collaboration in ways that privileged previously marginalised paradigms and practices (25).

This includes our relationship with the earth, our ancestors, and the multiple domains of Indigenous ways of being. As such we must privilege those approaches to reconciliation that do no harm to all of our relations. A decolonial approach to reconciliation, understands that restoring balance is inherently non-violent.

> Rather, the imbalance of violence must be countered by a re-establishing of relations. This means both victims and perpetrators of violence…must be seen as inextricably connected as kin, with the restoration of our relationships as a sacred order (Ansloos 2014: 130–131).

If enemies and/or oppressors are seen as relatives or relations, healing must be inclusive of them. The third teaching on *harmony* reinforces this notion. Hart (2002) suggests that harmony is:

> a process involving the relationships of all the various powers, energies and beings of the cosmos and happen when everyone—human, animal, plant and planet—fulfills their obligations and goes about their proper business. It requires people to live within the natural cycles that move life and to find a fit between the components of life through collaboration, sharing of what is available, cooperation and respect for all elements of life (43).

Harmony is a correlate of respectful relationships. Hart points out "harmony includes respect for one's relationships with others and within oneself, as well as the give and take between entities" (2002: 43). Negotiating this give and take must be done in ways that honours, respects, and builds trust between Indigenous people

and Settlers. We continue to see in Canada the betrayal of trust and the failure of Settler governments to follow through on establishing a relationship characterised by a respect for Indigenous perspectives. This disharmony is bound to the degradation of relational ethics.

A decolonial vision of reconciliation in Canada begs Indigenous people and Settler Canadians to embody a moral imagination which envisions harmonious relationality. Much of the socio-political oppression of Indigenous people that continues in Canada is predicated on the presumption of an assimilationist nationalist vision. This is oppressive to First Nations because it undermines the fundamental rights of self-determination enshrined in our traditional relationship via Treaties, and contemporary international law enshrined in the UNDRIP. This Indigenous conception of harmony envisions peace as parallel and intertwining rivers, interactive yet distinct, honouring of that which we share in common as well as protecting our distinctiveness in a harmonious way:

> Resistance informed by the teaching of harmony plays out as an ethical vocation of non-violent activism characterised by obligations to all creation. As such, this is a radical deconstruction of the inferiority of colonial otherness, towards an Indigenous identity asserted in the causes of justice, healing, and restoration for all of our relations (Ansloos 2014: 131).

Finally, Hart's discussion on the healing teaching corrects the mechanistic nature of psychiatric language employed by many in the contemporary peacebuilding movement by establishing that "healing is not only seen as the process of recovering from an illness or problem…healing is viewed as a journey" (2002: 43). Reconciliation is not solely a moment in time where apology intervenes on the wounds of colonial violence. Reconciliation must recognise the intergenerational nature of decolonial healing and necessitates that healing be contextualised as an intergenerational journey (Ansloos 2014).

For Indigenous people, decolonised reconciliation is a journey that must transcend the limitations of a linear, limited, or discrete understanding of place, time, and history. It assumes the reality of an Indigenous ontological life, which nuances the intrapsychic, interpersonal, intergenerational, and ecological work of healing (Hart 2010). Indigenous people are not exclusively interested in the reduction of symptoms of violence in individuals or the singular temporal reality of acknowledgement of violence; rather, "it is something that people practice daily throughout their lives. It is a broad transitional process that restores the person, community and nation to wholeness, connectedness, and balance" (Hart 2002: 43). Similarly, Nishnaabekwe scholar, Leanne Simpson (2011) has said:

> To me, reconciliation must be grounded in cultural generation and political resurgence. It must support Indigenous nations in regenerating our language, our oral cultures, our traditions of governance and everything else residential schools attacked and attempted to obliterate. Reconciliation must move beyond individual abuse to come to mean a collective re-balancing of the playing field. This idea is captured in the Nishnaabed concept *Aanji Maajitaawin*: to start over, the art of starting over, to regenerate. Reconciliation is a process of regeneration that will take many years to accomplish. We have to regenerate our languages so we have communities of fluent speakers. We have to regenerate the conditions

> that promote leaders and political systems based on our collective Nishnaabeg values, political processes and our philosophies. Canada must engage in decolonisation and a re-education project that would enable its government and its citizens to engage with Indigenous Peoples in a just and honourable way (22–23).

Decolonising reconciliation situates the work of healing colonial violence in a long, dynamic process, which supports, regenerates, and ultimately dignifies the expression of Indigenous identity. The Settler Canadian needs to deconstruct the identity of coloniser and begin to see those they oppress as kin, and the Indigenous person needs to deconstruct the inferiority of colonial oppression and see themselves as equal and worthy of dignity and respect. Healing is embodied through growth of both parties towards this restorative vision of identity.

Indigenous philosophy provides a sharp contrast to the hegemony of the Western self, which casts a limited vision of reconciling colonial violence. These Indigenous conceptions of *wholeness, balance*, *harmony*, and *healing*, add depth both to the ways we understand the impact of suffering and violence, and the way by which we imagine going forward together.

An Indigenous decolonised rendering of reconciliation challenges the colonial violence of individualism. Indigenous understandings of reconciliation suggest that the whole society suffers in the wake of colonial realities. It is not solely the colonised or racially oppressed self that must be made whole again, but all aspects of the equation including those who have colonised. Healing complex social conflicts requires that we acknowledge our contextual embedded-ness with one another and our interdependent futures. With such a collective vision, balance and harmony emphasise the capacity to empathise and work towards pathways of reconciliation. The convergence of these teachings on wholeness, balance, harmony, and healing in relationality is our medicine of peace.

6.5 Implications for Further Research, Policy and Practice

This chapter serves as an introduction to the idea of decolonising reconciliation in the Canadian context, and provides useful content for peacebuilders to be critically engaged in future research, policy, and practice. This chapter has raised the importance of framing peacebuilding with Indigenous populations from within the self-determined perspectives of Indigenous nations. Indigenous research by Indigenous people must be undertaken throughout Canada in order to transform Indigenous paradigms of peacebuilding. In addition, Settler Canadians and the Western field of peace and conflict transformation need to recognise the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples on the road to reconciliation. In this regard the UNDRIP serves as a powerful educational tool which translates this imperative globally. Human rights educational policy needs to advance public education on the integral role of Indigenous human rights.

Policy and programming should also be developed that helps to support a broader civic education in Canada's contemporary and historic colonial history. In

many ways this necessitates interdisciplinary and intersectional Indigenous scholarship, and critically reflective Indigenous voices in the promotion of decolonial reconciliation. On another level of policy, increased funding and development ought to support Indigenous cultural literacy programmes, in particular those programmes which revitalise Indigenous traditions of restorative justice, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding.

6.6 Narrative Conclusion

As I come to the end of this chapter, and reflect on the future of reconciliation in Turtle Island, I want to offers prayers for my people. I pray for peace for the 1200 and counting missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada and their many grieving families. On the day that I completed this chapter, I heard from home that a search for yet another missing Indigenous woman has been initiated near the banks of our red river in Winnipeg. May all of our relations protect her.

Indigenous people live in a world where the threat of violence is ever present. We live in sociopolitical contexts that continue to fail to promote justice for our people, where neocolonial oppression is the status quo. For us, peace is not yet our reality, but it remains our hope. Like the red river that carries water bringing life to its banks, as well as the bodies of our fallen sisters, mothers, and grandmothers, the work of building peace is full of possibility but also suffering.

We hope for peace like a red river because our red river is unstoppable. Our red river is alive. Flood seasons every year remind us that our river cannot be suppressed forever. Her waters surge beyond the embankments, overflowing like tears yearning for the healing of our people. Our red river is teaming with the vibrancy of our spirit, the wisdom of our mother earth and our ancestors, and carried forth by the love of our creator. We long for peace like our red river, resurgent with hope.

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