

*SSHRC and the Conscientious Community: reflecting and acting on Indigenous research and reconciliation in response to TRC Call to Action 65*

Dr. Aaron Franks

Mitacs-SSHRC Visiting Fellow in Indigenous Research and Reconciliation

## **1. Introduction**

The task of this short paper is to provide an informed, independent and critical perspective on the role of social sciences and humanities research in “advanc[ing] understanding of reconciliation” in Canada (TRC Call 65, 2015). Particular attention is given to the role of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) in shaping the discourse of reconciliation, and in supporting a research milieu and funding initiatives that reflect this vision. This paper is not a systematic review of existing initiatives, and certainly not a policy paper, official or otherwise. We are calling it a ‘think piece’, intended to push the edges of accepted thinking outward a bit, and I feel both privileged and daunted by the opportunity. While the paper was originally conceived by conference organizers to address “The Role of Research and Research Brokers in Reconciliation”, the focus has shifted to addressing the role of the *social sciences and humanities* in advancing *understanding* of reconciliation.

### *1.1. Paper outline*

The think-piece unfolds like this. You should know a bit about me, my positionality, and my relationship to SSHRC. And then how an ethic of decolonization frames my observations, deductions, my intuitions about practical action.

In a short Section Two I name some of the contradictions we need to face to do this work, and then in Section Three I share a snapshot from the public discussion of reconciliation, in this case from a radio news program, and reflect on how the social sciences and humanities (with an admitted bias to the qualitative) can challenge, take apart and reconnect these discussions in important ways.

Section Four delves into what SSHRC can do, as a prime agenda-shaping and of course funding agency, to advance understanding of reconciliation in concert with universities, Indigenous communities and other actors. The section first names two basic aims—promotion of autonomous research spaces in the long term interest of genuine nation-to-nation collaboration, and support for foundational research that develops Indigenous Knowledge systems first by and for Indigenous people—and then suggests five sets of actions:

- decentralization of SSHRC;
- indigenization of university and regional level research, learning and community collaboration;
- support for undergraduate, non-academic and other ‘unconventional’ HQPs and learners;
- institutional self-inquiry;

- strengthened support for interdisciplinarity and research-creation.

I conclude (Section Five) with a summation of ideas and a reinforcement of hope

### *1.2. My Position*

These reflections and proposals stem from my very particular position. I am Métis (more specifically Métis [Red River Settlement], English [Lincolnshire], Irish [Drumcree], Norwegian [Stavanger], German [unknown] and Muskego [around what became Fort York]), and do not have a landed community. I am an early career academic, but had a successful first career in the theatre. I have done extensive participatory research, but rarely with the sort of stable, bounded communities still somehow found in many texts. I have worked with Indigenous academics, artists, advocates and students but have never taken an Indigenous Studies course. In coming to know my positionality, including my Indigeneity, and my place in the Canadian story, I resist nostalgia and have come to depend instead on a materialist historical reading of the overlays between my family's journey and the enterprise of Canada, between myself and the colonial present.

I think my position has allowed me to think between Indigeneity 'in and for itself' and Indigeneity as a reflection of the desires and apprehension of broader, non-Indigenous society. I think I can recognize (but not fully inhabit) the very different experiences of Indigenous Resurgence as the recovery and enhancement of life and dignity in thousands maybe millions of local moments in what is now Canada, as a global project of territorial resistance and autonomous human development, and as a socio-political achievement framed nationally by a capitalist liberal democracy.

### *1.3 My Role*

My voice (and ear) at SSHRC is one of very many, and very recent at that. Since 2002 SSHRC has solicited input, deliberated and taken steps to implement research funding initiatives, reconsider grant review criteria, and support researcher, administrator, and student development in formal and informal ways, often in conjunction with other bodies. SSHRC has an Aboriginal Advisory Council (AAC), has met with many faculty and administrators at geographically diverse universities, and engages with organizations like the Canadian Indigenous/Native Studies Association (CINSA), Universities Canada, and the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. There are also multiple conversational channels between the "TC3+"<sup>1</sup>, and with federal agencies like INAC.

Through the Mitacs Canadian Science Policy Fellowship program, SSHRC has invited me to work alongside them in 2016-2017 as an independent researcher. From this unique position as a "critical friend", I assist SSHRC in taking on and responding to current and past consultations, and provide a transdisciplinary perspective that cuts across the complex ecology of SSHRC granting programs and related initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> The three Tri-Council funders plus the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI)

#### *1.4 Glimpsing Reconciliation*

Of course reconciliation is not resurgence; they mean different things and are used in discourse to do different things. But the current drive to *reconciliation*, while powered through formal governance channels and embodied in the exhaustive work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, owes much to Indigenous *resurgence(s)* even if the two are often in tension. Autonomy and accommodation agonistically—maybe antagonistically—make room for one another. Regardless of personal/political sympathies there is a basic dialectical reasoning to this. The social sciences and humanities, far from being the poor relations to other kinds of inquiry that research funding levels might suggest, will be central to understanding what is required—after so many decades of failure—to transform the nation to the point where reconciliation is not an empty token.<sup>2</sup>

Reconciliation must be much more akin to decolonization than accommodation; truly living Eighth Fire teachings<sup>3</sup> will mean a fundamental reconsideration and reconfiguration of geo-political relationships in Canada. The social sciences and humanities in Canada, not least through the actions and discourse of agenda-shaping organizations like SSHRC, will be both continually informing and informed by this reconfiguration.

In fact I have come to believe more and more that *decolonization is prerequisite for reconciliation*. I think we have to square up to the language we use. The authors of the TRC Report are careful to note in the Introduction to the Executive Summary (2015) that the term ‘reconciliation’ itself has multiple meanings and risks serving romanticized political imaginaries:

To some people, reconciliation is the re-establishment of a conciliatory state. However, this is a state that many Aboriginal people assert never has existed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. To others, reconciliation, in the context of Indian residential schools, is similar to dealing with a situation of family violence. It’s about coming to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people, going forward. It is in the latter context that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has approached the question of reconciliation. (7)

The sense of reconciliation I work from here is less concerned about definitions, as important as those may be, but is inspired by the TRC’s own declaration of action: “To the Commission, reconciliation is about *establishing* and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between

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<sup>2</sup> In keeping with the clarity demanded by transformative and lasting reconciliation, it must be said that many federal policies sought to eradicate – through assimilation or death – Indigenous people and that they came dangerously close to *succeeding* rather than *failing*. My point being we are in an extremely delicate time and it would be disingenuous and dangerous to suppose there is a line marking a 180 degree turn between what the state and society at large consider ‘success’ or ‘failure’.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the Eighth Fire concept in contemporary Anishnaabek thought, see Yvette Nolan’s book *Medicine Shows* (2015), Chapter 11, among other sources.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country.” (ibid) Establishing such relations requires decolonization as befits the progressive reconfiguration of a settler colonial society.

I don’t think there is a better word available than decolonization. It is a concept that, over the past decade or more, has been advanced in several consultations with SSHRC (e.g., some but certainly not all SSHRC interlocutors in CINSA, some members of the SSHRC Aboriginal Advisory Committee). It appears at times in shared discussion outcome documents. It is not alien thinking, but it remains for most people opaque, threatening and unactionable. But we are in a time when senior federal cabinet members such as Minister of Justice Jody Wilson-Raybould can publically enjoin the Assembly of First Nations to pursue decolonization. As a SSHRC staff member recently described discussing reconciliation while avoiding mention of decolonization, *it’s like gender, how can you discuss it without mentioning sexism?* At the same time... “The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation” (Tuck and Wang 2012:3).

### *1.5 Glimpses of SSHRC*

An in-depth analysis of SSHRC’s mandate and structure is beyond my task. However there are aspects of the organization that I feel are directly relevant to its capacity to fulfill TRC Call 65 in the transformative way befitting this historic opportunity.

SSHRC is highly centralized in Ottawa and is almost exclusively non-Indigenous in its staffing. It is heavily oriented to project and student/HQP funding rather than supporting ongoing operational costs for organizations or structural innovations in institutions.

At the earliest stages of developing its Aboriginal research initiatives, SSHRC borrowed to a degree from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) and its Institute of Aboriginal Peoples’ Health (IAPH). Notwithstanding the particular strengths of the CIHR/IAPH approach, I offer that the social sciences and humanities have benefitted from forging a path that begins with the strengths of its own wealth of disciplinary traditions, and SSHRC should further pursue this path.

SSHRC benefits from many committed professionals wanting to engage with the task of fulfilling Call 65. This call specifies that SSHRC work with “Aboriginal peoples, post-secondary institutions and educators and the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and its partner institutions”. It has been pointed out that although several of staff and management have PhDs, very few have extensive experience working in a university. This is not at all a reflection on competence or commitment; but, as with the lack of Indigenous staff and management, it necessitates a high level of translation between institutional cultures, in this case from university/research to government/policy.

### *1.6 Stakes and opportunities*

SSHRC management tasked with thinking through TRC Call 65 have been generous with their thoughts and concerns; in one instance two perceived “existential” risks and obstacles were identified which I believe merit frank and wide-ranging discussion:

1) Autonomy and Accountability in the current State-Patron relationship.

Indigenous peoples and the organizations that represent them rightfully demand a much higher degree of self-determination in how they manage their affairs and advocate for their interests in their relationships with other levels of government, corporations and other actors. This is equally true of greater Indigenous control over research that impacts Indigenous communities, First Nations and other stakeholders. The Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Métis National Council and others say in various ways “we need your help” and in the same breath “let us do it ourselves”. While on one level there is increased understanding why this should be so, there is little capacity within state institutions to facilitate ‘peer to peer’ or nation-to-nation relations where it is perceived most of the financial expenses are born by one partner .

2) The Legitimacy of Indigenous Knowledge and the Research that is Funded.

What is Indigenous Knowledge and who will accept its validity? What is at stake by admitting Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into the research paradigm (and consequent “Credibility of our research and status in the community, here and globally”). A new element of IKS being brought into the ‘research tent’ is huge ask, especially when the social science and humanities are already seen as ‘soft’ and hard to justify. I was surprised by the sincere urgency expressed in the statement (and I paraphrase) *we are trapped, because our mandate is western paradigm, empiricist research*. The sense was that in a very real way the primacy of western enlightenment epistemology could be at stake.

## **2. Grounds for Suspicion, Hope and Action**

Like research, research funding is not value-neutral; likewise, in a world of boundaries and limits (often quite helpful ones), a hyper-pluralistic approach (“let a thousand flowers bloom”) is not realizable in some pure form. Having laid out where I’m coming from, my present sense of reconciliation and my recent experiences of SSHRC (who have been brilliantly generous hosts), I want to square my thinking up to the challenges by naming some contradictions. In general we need to stop talking about first steps and beginnings. The colonial relationship that has oppressed Indigenous people is centuries old, the Indian Act is 140 years old, individuals spoke out against the Indian Residential School system a hundred years ago, RCAP reported its findings twenty years ago. The reality is that more facts might be very helpful in addressing specific problems but they are not the foundation for the change that has eluded us, or more accurately that we have evaded.

Thinking deeply through reconciliation presents necessary challenges to *procedural* notions of dialogue and equity. I purposefully engage with the words of two prominent Indigenous social leaders who are respected within multiple Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, Senator Murray Sinclair and Professor Cindy Blackstock.

### *2.1. Difference is Real*

‘Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem. It is a Canadian problem. It involves all of us.’

– Murray Sinclair

From this statement I draw two directions— a) that a reconciliation aimed at ‘fixing’ Indigenous people and their problems while the state and non-Indigenous society remain unaltered is a perpetuation of oppression and violence, and b), that while this problem may indeed involve all of us, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada are differentially positioned. Furthermore, as recognized by Section 35 of the Constitution Act (1982) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People to which Canada is a signatory, Indigenous people have the right to assert this difference.

*In short, yes all people in Canada, but not all together, all of the time.*

This is challenging. It challenges ideas of equity and federalism, and deeply engrained tenants of liberalism and pluralism. It challenges a prevailing (though not universally accepted) vision of ‘the academy’ as a smooth space where competing ideas jostle collegially on a level playing field. SSHRC is mandated to work on behalf of all Canadians, and is the primary funding instrument for the social sciences and humanities in Canada. Excitingly, this increasingly involves partnerships between university-based researchers and a multitude of non-university actors—community groups, government agencies, business and NGOs.

This paper argues that for social science and humanities research to advance understanding of reconciliation *autonomous research spaces by and for Indigenous actors, and also spaces for non-Indigenous reflection and self-inquiry, need to be facilitated.* Not without irony, effective dialogue and mutually beneficial human (and ecological) development will depend on not papering over difference. But there are options besides either essentialist separatism or relativist pluralism.

## *2.2. Reconciliation is Good But Costs*

‘We’re going to have to have some courage in research. We’re going to have to have the courage to embrace what hurts as a country, and support those who are helping us do it.’

– Cindy Blackstock (2016)<sup>4</sup>

Far from fetishizing suffering (be it from guilt, oppression or both), or wallowing in it, reconciliation will require not only the recognition of, but the epistemological acceptance of, great ontological loss. In other words, as social scientists, artists, researchers, commentators, educators, learners and leaders we need to reweave death and absence into our thinking and lifeworld. I think this is required at the level of narratives of Canadian federalism and nation-building as I sense Blackstock implies above, as well as in the realm of worldviews, and frankly the specific violences of modernity.

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<sup>4</sup> interview, SSHRC Knowledge Synthesis Grants: Aboriginal Peoples video; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nOwOQbdSl8>; last accessed Oct 18, 2016.

This too is challenging, in that it rubs against the current paradigm of problem-solving, and risks (maybe) imposing some further colonial injustice, something like: *If Indigenous peoples are beginning to overcome violence and reassert themselves as vibrant societies, isn't it the wrong time to question modernity and deny 'them' the gifts of modern progress?*

While research addressing excruciating levels of imposed violence, preventable illness and environmental destruction is urgently needed, a primarily “emergency first responder” approach also threatens to crowd out the “slow research”, the theoretically rich, methodologically challenging and socially risky research needed to advance understanding of reconciliation.

### **3. What the Social Sciences and Humanities Can Do**

Perhaps it's because I did my PhD in a discipline with both “physical” and “human” branches (Geography) and so frequently saw the institutional jostling between them up close, but too often I still sense the social sciences and humanities positioned as the “communications office” for the natural and applied sciences. So we must argue for the *independent* abilities of these disciplines, not least the qualitative fields, to explain phenomena, connect processes, and facilitate action toward reconciliation. I offer a very modest illustration of drilling down into the public discourse of reconciliation here.

CBC Radio One's *Ottawa Morning* with Robyn Bresnahan (Oct 19, 2016) featured two stories that in some ways mark the opposite edges of the public face of reconciliation, and illustrate the role of the social sciences and humanities in shaping the discourse of reconciliation and enacting research accordingly. Both wrestle with pain and extraordinary loss, but in different ways.

#### *3.1. Love and family*

In the first, we heard about Tragically Hip singer and writer Gord Downie and *The Secret Path* project. This collaborative project illuminates the life and death of Chanie (Charlie) Wenjack, an Ojibwe boy who died of exposure in the forest at the age of 12 while running away from Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in Kenora, and searching for his home 400 miles away. Downie and members of the Wenjack family, including Charlie's sister Pearl Achneepineskum, have begun the Downie/Wenjack Fund “to raise money to bring other Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together”.<sup>5</sup> In the brief radio piece, as well as in much other media coverage, we are asked to witness the open grief and suffering of the Wenjack family, and how this family's story is now entwined with Downie (who is publically living through terminal brain cancer) through transformative loss and grieving. Through this creative and deeply personal collaboration with the Wenjacks, Downie enjoins society to act now on reconciliation: "It's just time to get started. It's time to get going, okay."

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<sup>5</sup> See coverage at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/wenjack-family-response-secret-path-1.3808589>. All quotes in this passage are taken from this article

What is arresting about this relationship between the Wenjacks and Downies is not so much the ‘call to arms’ but the risky and public—in Downie’s brother Mike’s words—“intersection” of the men’s lives, Charlie and Gord: “It’s strange in the way Gord sings the songs in first person,” said Mike Downie, his brother. “He sings about dying in the last song and after the diagnosis – you know I want to say it changed, but in some ways it didn’t . . . these two lives had intersected.” The article goes on to state ‘Pearl says she feels the connection, too. “He’s my brother now,” she says of Downie.’

I say risky because without deep and reciprocal trust (as appears to be the case with Pearl, Chanie, and Gord), non-Indigenous allies (like the Downies) risk absorbing Chanie Wenjack’s death in a settler’s “move to innocence” (Malwhinney, 1998, in Tuck and Wang, 2012:3) and a move to personal healing rather than societal transformation. The positionality of an artist like Downie is vital in exploring these relations as are the social sciences and humanities in deepening this exchange, edging along representation, the experiential and the subjective/transsubjective:

During the concert on Tuesday, Downie shivered and hugged himself as he pantomimed Wenjack’s final steps along the railway tracks, which the dying boy hoped would lead him home.

Yet somehow, by embodying the child who died, Downie appeared to become more alive on stage.

"It’s filling him up," said Mike Downie. "He’s not looking back. He’s looking forward and he’s busy living right now."

Chanie Wenjack’s story speaks to many artists, who make it their own and shape it in many ways. In *BEFORE*, a spoken word track with Joseph Boyden from A Tribe Called Red’s 2016 album “We Are The Halluci Nation”, Boyden speaks as “Jack”, an Indigenous man making “a collect call” from inside “an AlieNation Correctional Institution”. He speaks to Charlie and closes with *You’re still hurting Charlie. We’re gonna hurt for a long time. We hurt from the before, and it makes us hurt so bad right now.*

If public reflections on Chanie Wenjack’s death as a direct result of the colonial violence of the Indian Residential School system have made the mainstream pause to reflect, advancing *understanding of reconciliation* requires acknowledging and exploring the effects of the unbroken line between the IRS and other colonial institutions, including correctional facilities.

### 3.2. Love and land

A few minutes later, radio host Bresnahan featured a story, played out in contrast well away from the public eye, on an agreement between the Algonquins of Ontario<sup>6</sup> and the provincial and

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.tanakiwin.com/>

federal governments, described as a formal precursor to a “modern treaty” unprecedented in Ontario.

There was a subtle but powerful dissonance between the host’s approach to the land agreement story and the meaning of the land agreement to the speakers she featured, and I argue the dissonances in the conversation reflect in part the tensions between Indigeneity of and for itself and Indigeneity as a reflection of the desires and apprehensions of broader society. I quote the exchange with some edits here:

CBC Radio host Robyn Bresnahan (RB): Can you tell us what is *different today* than when you signed this agreement yesterday morning? (emphasis in voice)

Chief legal counsel and primary negotiator for the Algonquins of Ontario Robert Potts (RP):...it is an agreement in principal...a framework for future negotiations. *But* it is an important step though, because it has taken *a quarter of a millennium* to get to this point, the Algonquins have been petitioning for this *very* thing, pursuant to the Royal Proclamation, since *1772*. So this is the first step to the realization of that treaty which has been *so long* in coming and the consummation of a reconciliation process that we hope to have completed in the modern treaty.

RB: Where does ‘reconciliation’ come into this?

RP: Well reconciliation – (restraining a laugh) – that’s the very *essence* of what we’re doing here. We’re trying to find a solution that will provide the Algonquin of Ontario with a meaningful land base, an appropriate economic and financial base to re-establish the place they had in their part of the country when they were first here and we first arrived.

And that’s really what this is about. But in doing so, we’re going to have to resolve this within the context of 250 years of history in which we have come, we have settled, we have moved them off the lands...and now we have to come up with a settlement with the Algonquins to achieve something they should have had to begin with.

To start the segment Bresnahan had first played part of a statement by Chief Kirby White Duck of Pikwakanagan First Nation, a member nation of the Algonquins of Ontario:

We can pretend we’ll never settle, that we’ll never give up our rights...but right now 60% of land in the territory is privately owned, and maybe in the future 80% will be privately owned so there won’t be anything. So it’s a tough choice to make: either you live on principle and have nothing, or you make a negotiated agreement.

Bresnahan puts it to Potts that “it seems like from [that] clip...there was a lot of, kind of internal negotiations happening, that this was not an easy decision to for the Algonquins to make”. She asks Potts to share “what you were hearing from them”:

RP: I think Kirby was expressing the *very pain* that you have seen in the petitions that were filed by the Algonquins over the past 250 years and were studiously ignored. It’s *very painful* for people to have had

their lands...suddenly removed and to lose their way of life that they were quite capable of maintaining forever if not for us.

And there's a tremendous amount of angst about the treatment they have received over the years, the racism, the residential schools, you can continue to add it. But what Kirby is expressing as well is that as a leader he feels the necessity to move forward... and in so doing engage with governments on a nation to nation basis with respect, and to engage with the neighbours that we've had in the area for the past 250 years...to try and resolve some of that outstanding history that was so painful—*that's* reconciliation.

### 3.3. *Love and research*

The point of including these two brief radio spots in some detail is to highlight the role of social science and humanities research in “advancing understanding of reconciliation”. This must include targeted research aimed at meeting immediate needs, but also less obviously instrumental research that, from my reading of these two stories, explores differing experiences of:

- criteria of ‘success’ and the Pyrrhic victories of settlement processes, negotiation and ultimately reconciliation;
- the cost not only of past injustices, but of the current and future process of reconciliation itself;
- Time. Where are we when there is so much talk of “starting” and “new beginnings”, and others are speaking from the middle of a centuries-old process?
- The legitimate place in the world of emotions, affect and experiential knowledge as a core part of Indigenous, non-Indigenous and relational (both within and between the two) governance and socio-economic relations.

Such research must combine the analytical and affective, the historical and personal, and the territorial and familial.

### 3.4. *Reconciliation in the Material World*

A major challenge to using the rhetoric of reconciliation in a sincere, good way, and to an organization like SSHRC that is charged with advancing knowledge in a pluralistic yet focused way, is that it is easy to forget that reconciliation (with concomitant Indigenous recovery and resurgence) is not a mental project. It is material, fleshy and real. The strong call from many critics of the discourse of reconciliation is that most often reconciliation is confined to a strictly individual/familial psychological process of recognition, grieving and recovery without (conveniently) much or any attention to the material basis of national resurgence and autonomy: land. This I imagine is the attitude that elicited Potts' suppressed chuckle in response to the question (and I paraphrase) ‘What does this land agreement have to do with reconciliation?’

Material/ecological and social/political conditions are changing, and advancing understanding of reconciliation requires advancing understanding of the future-facing conditions it will have to be achieved within. Couldn't these conditions include...*everything*? In theory. But I argue that *climate change* and emerging *forms of governance* are focal points of academic and social interest worthy of funding calls and targeted programs that span any discipline

enfolded in the ‘SS&H’. This includes the fine arts, literature, cultural studies and the like alongside sociology, anthropology, geography and other social sciences.

#### **4. What SSHRC Can Do**

It may be time for SSHRC to venture into new organizational territory by supporting the resourcing and self-organization of Indigenous-led initiatives, in addition to its more traditional activity of competitive project-based research funding. I argue that SSHRC can and should engage more openly with the question of decolonization, specifically the relationship between decolonization and reconciliation and, in the specific world of research, meaningful collaboration.

In asking what can SSHRC do we are also asking how might SSHRC need to change. When I think of ‘doing’ activities, I think not only of programming, granting, outreach and communications, but also developing the frameworks and working principles that underpin these tools. Similarly change at SSHRC might mean shifts in structure but also in its sense of leadership and awareness of the importance of the social sciences and humanities to transformative, lasting reconciliation.

I suggest focus can be shared between negotiating collaboration and autonomy, and the (re)development of Indigenous Knowledge systems.

##### *4.1. Building collaboration through supporting autonomy*

We need an open and critical discussion on the theory and practice of making *autonomous Indigenous research space*. By this I mean the possibilities for research that does not insist on partnership with non-Indigenous actors, and where benefits may not be readily apparent to non-Indigenous communities and institutions.

Collaboration is a necessary aim, but within existing structures collaboration can be inadvertently coercive. This is especially true when university-based academics (likely to be non-Indigenous) are increasingly charged with making “impact”, and governments, agencies and other organizations working on behalf of Indigenous people face an incredible list of threats to survival and well-being (see Coombes et al, 2014).

Similarly, we need critical discussion on the theory and practice of making *peer-to-peer spaces for non-Indigenous or ‘Settler’ research and education*. By this I mean the possibilities for research, education and outreach that do not demand that Indigenous academics and communities are enrolled in educating their non-Indigenous peers. Collaboration by all means, but non-Indigenous partners must demonstrate reflexive knowledge of their positions, accountability for structural power imbalances, and the willingness and capacity to investigate and query the historical, cultural and socio-political base for their circumstances and motivation for collaboration.

One of the many powerful research tropes these critical conversations might touch on is community, a concept which as pointed out by a SSHRC Aboriginal Advisory Circle member “has been problematized by about 100 years of research”. One powerful definition of

community, that allows for flexibility of place, scale and identity but that brings a common (but contestable) purpose to bear is community as the ‘continually reproduced desire to overcome the adversity of social life’ (Brent 2004:221).

#### *4.2. Championing the (re)development of Indigenous Knowledge systems*

Consider this statement:

“Family clans have been severed and because we are a relational people, our relationships to our environment and our cosmology, places us in a state of upheaval. It is almost like our bodies have been evacuated to somewhere foreign and unhealthy.”

- Stan Wilson, Opaskwayak Cree Nation<sup>7</sup>

I suggest that not all but enough of us understand this statement enough to make it a basis for further inquiry and action, without having to ask “Yes, but what does he *mean*?”, without having to translate Mr. Wilson’s ‘diagnosis’ of unhealth. If the academy is indeed pluralistic and also sincerely seeking to Indigenize, Mr. Wilson’s evidence will be seen as illuminating not confounding.<sup>8</sup> This does not mean not open to interpretation, nor critique, but the ontological realities of relationality, embodiment, and the always/already interpellation of environment and cosmology should now be established as ‘credible’.

One of the many tensions an institutionalized academic engagement with Indigenous knowledge triggers is the legitimacy and transferability of land-based knowledge systems. It is an important discussion and one where, without ‘discovering’ and appropriating Indigenous epistemologies, the western/Euro-American academy can learn much. And there are some resonances between “the spatial turn” in the social sciences and humanities and what Glenn Coulthard calls Indigenous land-based normativity (2014).

Above all, there is a great need to enable research that not only employs or instrumentalizes Indigenous knowledge, but asks what is it *now*, and actively *builds* it. SSHRC and the academy writ large cannot expect fully formed and efficacious Indigenous inquiry and educational practices to enter into equitable peer-to-peer relations with their western/Euro-American counterparts that are entrenched in our institutions. A critical conversation on autonomous research spaces should also address how Indigenous knowledges, when encountering mainstream research, are almost invariably required to perform for their partners and peers in ways prevailing systems are not.

#### *4.3. Specific Measures*

I will take a deep breath and respectfully suggest five (fairly) specific measures that SSHRC could take. Like the rest of this thought-piece, they are intended to provoke discussion.

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<sup>7</sup> from “Effects of Hydroelectric Land Disruption: Reflections on the OCN Territory”, Hydro Research Alliance, Spring 2016 Newsletter.

<sup>8</sup>If justification from a Western/Euro-American perspective is required consider American pragmatist philosopher C.S. Peirce’s category of abductive reasoning, in addition to deduction and induction.

#### 4.3.1. Decentralization

SSHRC could connect more effectively with diverse constituencies by moving, physically and virtually, some of its operations out of Ottawa and its centre on 350 Albert Street. This could happen in two ways. Certain of SSHRC's core activities could be moved to a second urban centre in the West, and Indigenous research programming and academic, government and community engagement could take place in both. Sound impossible? It has been floated that all of the Tri-Council funders be co-located in the old NRC Canada Laboratories Building at 100 Sussex Drive, though there are concerns there would not be enough room for all three. Relocating certain operations to a second office could create this space.

A more likely scenario would be a small number SSHRC centres that are housed in regionally and culturally diverse universities and colleges. They could rotate to serve a new location every five to ten years. These centres would bring together the complementary capacities of Indigenous and allied researchers, educators, elders, knowledge keepers and pathfinders,<sup>9</sup> administrators, Indigenous student and community organizations, local and regional First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities,

In the view of one speaker invited to SSHRC, representing an Indigenous community organization in a Partnership Grant (and I paraphrase): “You’ve got to get out of this building, get out of Ottawa. Bring your expertise to other places to help incubate research”.

#### 4.3.2. Indigenization of resources and approach

This ties in directly to the establishment of the regional centres described above. These nodes would provide distinctive self-organizing spaces for Indigenous faculty, and would, through intentional and extended engagement deepen understanding of elders, knowledge keepers and pathfinders and their unique hybrid roles in academia, student support and community engagement, and secure better resources for them as key parts of these horizontally organized nodes.

In case this seems wildly out of tune with the way universities can work, it should be pointed out that through much effort, foresight and creative energy such “nodes” are already in the making. As an example, Nipissing University is a relatively small university in North Bay, Ontario near several First Nations. It has a dynamic Aboriginal Initiatives office that integrates its teaching and learning functions with both its student support and community engagement activities. It works closely with faculty, deans and department heads, undergraduate and graduate students, as well as facilitating links with several local First Nations, the City of North Bay and its Reconciliation North Bay initiative and multiple primary and secondary schools in the area.

In collaboration with Universities Canada, CFI, INAC, individual universities and other actors, SSHRC could provide structural, multi-year funding to such a centre. The centre would

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<sup>9</sup> I am thinking of diverse Indigenous practices and positionalities that often get conflated into the term “Elder”. For example Mary Ann Spencer, a Mohawk-Dutch Elder in Residence at Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre at Queen’s University, considers herself a *pathfinder* in a Mohawk cultural and intellectual mode. See <http://www.queensu.ca/gazette/stories/pathfinder-knowledge-carrier-and-guide-life>

organize to meet local needs relatively organically as in the Nipissing example, but would have extra capacity to:

- coordinate regional initiatives between multiple universities, colleges, First Nations, Inuit and Métis, groups representing ‘unlanded’ Indigenous communities, and other collaborators;
- in conjunction with other regional centres have a stronger, more proactive advisory role than the current SSHRC Aboriginal Advisory Council; this could take the form of multiple Regional Advisory Circles;
- play a potential role in peer review and determining review criteria;
- strengthen the resources available to Elders and Knowledge Keepers, create more reciprocal relationships with them, and practice respect for their complex and often hard-earned lived experience.

These “Centres Plus” could act as regionally-sensitive research coordinating hubs for a fixed period of time, with a handful of centres operating around the country at any given time and moving periodically.

On a final note, I envision these centres empowering the growing cohort of Indigenous faculty working across many disciplines, with their own complex and evolving relationships to Indigeneity and reconciliation, to shape multiple agendas in advancing understanding of reconciliation.

#### *4.3.3. Expanding training opportunities*

An area of keen interest for many SSHRC-funded researchers and Indigenous community organizations, SSHRC should consider ongoing funding for training non-academic, secondary school, undergraduate or otherwise “non-traditional” HQPs (Highly Qualified Personnel in grantspeak) and learners. Community-engaged research can benefit immeasurably from the contributions of these participants and partners, but for a variety of reasons such collaborators may not find it appropriate to enroll in a SSHRC-eligible HE (Higher Education) institution. The HE enrollment and completion rates for Indigenous students are extremely low, but some proposed improvements might be counterintuitive. For example an Indigenous academic involved in a multi-partner community research project with many HQPs noted in discussion that in her experience, Indigenous youth participating in this work may not immediately see themselves as a ‘a fit’ for academic research and learning, but can change their perspective in their own time through involvement in the work and watching their peers do so as well.

#### *4.3.4. Institutional self-inquiry*

This involves increasing the capacity of mainstream institutions to play their part in reconciliation without imposing a double burden on Indigenous communities—the double burden of being marginalized and then being required to educate and in a sense assuage the concerns of non-Indigenous partners.

This is difficult work but not unprecedented. The National Arts Centre of Canada (NAC) is preparing to establish an Indigenous Theatre division to work independently from and alongside the French and English Theatre divisions. A fundamental part of this process has been an extensive process of dialogue, reflection and at times difficult encounter with Indigenous theatre makers of all kinds that the NAC and partners called The Indigenous Cycle. It consisted of several parts over 2014-2015. First *The Summit* gathered twelve Indigenous leaders and ten institutional listeners over three days at the Banff Centre for the Arts. A year later, strongly informed by the experience of *The Summit*, theatre company Debajehmujig/Storytellers hosted Indigenous theatre makers and NAC administrators at their home space on Manitoulin Island over eleven days for *The Study*, and finally *The Repast*.

Of the many takeaways from this series of immersions, deep listening sessions and dialogues, a key one for the NAC has been to acknowledge the space that needs to be made within its own structure not just for Indigenous voices and faces but for Indigenous leadership and creative and organizational forms. On a personal level, those involved were able to come to this teaching through experiential learning and at times difficult self-reflection.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.3.5. *Value interdisciplinary, qualitative and research-creation work*

I confess to having little specific to suggest here at this point, but am making it a priority to learn more. I would like to learn much more with SSHRC and other funders (from NSERC to Canada Council) how they approach ‘truly’ or radically interdisciplinary research,<sup>11</sup> and hear what the experiences of other students and faculty members are (not to mention university research officers, and Indigenous and community organizations that collaborate on such proposals and projects). I feel it needs mentioning here, even as a place holder, because full-spectrum reconciliation will require this sort of research.

There may also be productive conversations to be had on the theme of ‘research creation’ at SSHRC, specifically on the connections between research, material practice, culture, aesthetics, and ‘radical’ interdisciplinarity. How can Indigenous work make use of the ‘research creation’ frame, and how can non-Indigenous ‘research creation’ respectfully learn from Indigenous approaches? In what ways could we understand an energetic commitment to research creation as a way of Indigenizing the Academy?

## 5. Conclusion

"All people in Canada must be clear, loud and united in expressing their heartfelt belief that reconciliation must happen in order for it to be effective."

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<sup>10</sup> For in-depth description and reflection on this journey, I encourage readers to go to see <http://nac-cna.ca/en/stories/story/the-summit-the-study> and download the documents

<sup>11</sup> It's entirely subjective, but by ‘radically’ interdisciplinary I mean work fully integrating, for example, an epidemiologist, a poet and a botanist, as opposed to an epidemiologist, an oncologist and a toxicologist.

– Senator Murray Sinclair<sup>12</sup>

This is a daunting enough step, but with respect I offer that the impulse for clarity and unity cannot be the basis for SSHRC efforts to “advance understanding of reconciliation”, which is the TRC’s direct charge to SSHRC. The greatest threat to this moment is not dissensus or conflict, but that reconciliation becomes a filter through which business-as-usual practices and policies are passed largely unaltered, and legitimated ‘on the other side’. Avoiding this will require the will, honesty and courage to allow the most catalytic aspects of reconciliation to penetrate and transform a decolonizing Canada for First Nations, as well as settlers and newcomers.

Decolonization is deliberate here.

From a research perspective I have advocated that SSHRC work to empower and reconfigure its Indigenous advisory and review bodies (e.g., the regional centres) and make room for established and emergent Indigenous leadership in the social sciences and humanities. Bolstering capacity is as much a requirement for mainstream, agenda-shaping institutions themselves (i.e., self-inquiry at SSHRC) as it is for beleaguered Indigenous communities. To make an imperfect analogy between the social sciences and humanities and health and well-being, “SS&H” research to advance transformative reconciliation will need to not only attend to urgent needs, (the emergency room), but spend the time and resources needed to foster nation-to-nation relations and diverse academic engagements from a perspective of Indigenous resurgence and decolonization (lifelong holistic care and ecological health). This requires committing resources to non-traditional research contributors and learners (e.g., funding these HQPs outside of university structures), strengthening existing commitments to interdisciplinary work and research-creation, and acknowledging in practice that Indigenous Knowledges are coming into being and distinct autonomous spaces are required for that to happen.

A degree of humility and perspective to close with—Indigenous people will continue to live, organize and realize themselves in spite of historical efforts to assimilate or annihilate them. What SSHRC does now is important, but as an Aboriginal Advisory Committee member pointed out in an email:

I’m inclined to think in terms of *emerging* issues in addition to gap issues. We know very little about the emerging nature of Aboriginal society and how to support it beyond an examination of the problems: our assumptions have been that Aboriginal society will look very much like modern Canadian society (and while that *may* be true, it hasn’t been tested). Public policy options I think need to flow from this understanding as much as the gap analysis. (emphasis added)

We must be open to making a future that develops quite differently from the proscriptive and punitive relationships we have settled on too often to date.

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<sup>12</sup> Spoken at the ceremony marking release of TRC Report, June 2, 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-tuesday-edition-1.3096950/reconciliation-is-not-an-aboriginal-problem-it-is-a-canadian-problem-it-involves-all-of-us-1.3097253>

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