

STOLEN GENEROSITY AND NURTURANCE OF IGNORANCE: OH CANADA, OUR “HOME” /S NATIVE LAND

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ABSTRACT

The relations between immigrants and First Nations people must be examined in light of the fact that, regardless of whether we are born into settler states or we are immigrants who choose to occupy Indigenous territories, as settlers we benefit from the usurpation of Indigenous territories and the continuing oppression of Indigenous peoples. Settler entitlement to Native land is advanced on the basis of misinformation and colonial ideology which denies the inherent and collective land rights of Indigenous nations in order to claim Canada as "our home and native land." An ongoing commitment to peaceful coexistence between Indigenous people and Canadian settlers requires decolonization, truth telling, and restitution.

INTRODUCTION

As a nation built by immigrants, Canada has to pay attention to settlement issues because of ongoing influxes of newcomers, yet very rarely is consideration given to the impact of immigrant settlement on Aboriginal Peoples.¹ It is important to locate the idea of “newcomers” in a broader historical context of Canada as a nation of settlers who have been coming into the territories of Indigenous Peoples in a steady flow for several hundred years. From this vantage point, we can explore the unwillingness and inability of most Canadians to understand the impact of colonial goals and interests on Indigenous Peoples, not just as individuals, but also as nations of distinct peoples. Memmi (1965) asserts that, regardless of whether we are born into settler states or we are immigrants who choose to occupy Indigenous territories, settlers benefit from the ongoing usurpation of Indigenous territories and the continuing oppression of Indigenous Peoples.² Canadian socialization inculcates ideologies that present European imperial pursuits and colonization as inevitable, evolutionary, and necessary, whereas Indigenous Peoples’ perspectives on Canadian settlement in their territories have been suppressed and ignored. Canadians are woefully uninformed about the treaties our governments have signed with Indian nations

and the abrogation of the promises that were made to Native nations through treaties in exchange for the right to live in their territories forever. Today, Canadian settlers claim the Indigenous territories of over half this continent as “our home and native land.” We do this by appropriating the indigeneity of Indigenous Peoples (Barman, 2007) and bestowing it upon the descendants of settlers, while simultaneously denying the existence of the inherent and collective land rights of Indigenous Peoples whose history in these territories can be traced back thousands of years.

Canadian settlers, old and new, do not learn about the diverse identities and cultures of the Indigenous Peoples of this continent, instead referring to all these nations collectively as “Indians,” “Aboriginals,” or “Natives.” Canadians claim a lack of awareness about the treachery, duplicity, and savagery used to divest Indigenous Peoples of their lands and resources, and the genocidal consequences of past and present policy and legislation that has contributed to the destruction of languages, lifeways, and cultures that have existed here for thousands of years. Instead, we are more likely to have learned to explain the dire conditions of everyday life that Native Peoples are subjected to in Canada by regurgitating the steady diet of lies and stereotypes that we have been fed, including the usual blaming-the-victim

stereotypes that conjure the backwardness, lack of industry, atavism, and inferiority of Indigenous peoples. Settlers deny our roles as architects, builders, and maintenance workers in Canada’s nation-building project, which has resulted in the social construction of the isolation, impoverishment, and attempted annihilation of Indigenous peoples.

NATIONAL MYTHS AND FOUNDING PREJUDICES

The idea of Canada as a multicultural nation—founded on democratic principles and the rule of law—is contradicted by historical records which reveal that the roots of our nation lie in Christian nationalism,³ industrial capitalism, and racialized assumptions about the intellectual and social supremacy of European peoples. Assimilation into capitalist ideology, Eurocentric education, and anglo-conformity (Fleras, 2010) is the price paid by subsequent streams of immigrants who want to partake in the patterns of privilege that accrue from displacing and dispossessing First Peoples of their lands and resources. Across the generations and irrespective of the diverse trajectories that have necessitated our migrations to this continent, what binds us together as settlers is the tripartite basis of our settler privilege: the processes of usurpation, dispossession, and oppression. The freedom and privilege of Canadian settlers is granted and structured by the same ongoing colonial force and power that has simultaneously dispossessed, displaced, and destroyed Indigenous nations.

What factors can explain the callous disregard and steadfast indifference of Canadian settlers towards the Indigenous nations we continue to displace? Given Indigenous Peoples’ well-documented acceptance, respect, and generosity afforded to early settlers (Wright, 2003; Weatherford, 1989), Indigenous Peoples cannot be held accountable for the hostile and aggressive actions against them by Canadians. Alfred (1999) identifies common principles shared by Indigenous Peoples that are evident in his people’s *Kaienerekowa* (the great law of peace), which includes “commitment to a profoundly respectful way of governing, based on a worldview that balances respect for autonomy with recognition of a universal interdependency, and promotes peaceful coexistence among all elements of creation” (p. xvi). Indigenous Peoples accepted early settlers, forged covenants of friendship, and courageously proposed arrangements of sharing and coexisting that most Canadian settlers have yet to comprehend, experience, or support. Hundreds of distinct peoples with diverse languages, sociocultural traditions, governance systems, and economic bases existed on this continent prior to the arrival of European settlers, necessitating the development of numerous social and political strategies to prevent war and maintain a peaceful coexistence. Borrows (2005) notes:

Aboriginal Peoples pursued, inter alia, treaties, feasting, trade, negotiations, marriages, friendship, conferences, games, contests, dances, ceremonial events, and demarcations of land [...]. Early Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relationships followed many of the same protocols and values that Aboriginal Peoples used to create peace (p. 1).

It is important to distinguish the actual relationship most Canadians have created with Native Peoples from the one we have enshrined in our collective imagination (Francis, 2011; Monture-Okanee, 1994). Our cultural mythology, perpetuated through Canadian education and media stereotypes, holds that Canada was forged by noble and civilized men acting out of fairness, justice, and the rule of law. This myth serves as an important tool in supporting our assertion that Canada is a duly constituted nation-state with clear and unchallenged domain over the territories that it occupies. Canadians want to believe that we are a nation of “benevolent peacemakers” (Regan, 2010) whose relationship with Aboriginal Peoples developed through practices of nonviolence and negotiated settlement. However, as Barker (2006) notes, “the concepts of benevolent administration, peaceful coexistence, and fair treaty making have all been shown to be completely false; yet they endure in the Canadian settler consciousness as powerful sources of national identity” (p. 120).

Paradoxically, another myth embedded in Canadian consciousness celebrates “how the West was won” through the exploits of brave cowboys who vanquished hostile Indians standing in the way of progress and civilization. The Hollywood myth-making machine has left a strong impression on the general public about the relationship between settlers and Indigenous Peoples. Such American media concoctions are internalized by many Canadians, who then dismiss the existence of Indigenous Peoples’ land rights by claiming that these were lost through conquest. In conflating American history with our own, Canadians fail to acknowledge crucial differences: while the United States opted for war and conquest, the British claimed the path of peaceful negotiation and relied heavily on Indian nations as allies in their colonial wars with the French and Americans, including the War of 1812 (Allen, 1992). The myth of British and subsequent Canadian military conquest resulting in our ownership of Indigenous lands as the spoils of war reveals a willful ignorance perpetuated through the denial and re-writing of history and the decisions of our legal institutions such as the Supreme Court of Canada that has repeatedly ruled that the inherent and collective rights of Aboriginal Peoples can never be extinguished by Canada.

Canada's highest court recognizes that Aboriginal title⁴ and rights to lands they have inhabited from time immemorial existed long before any European settlers arrived, and as such, are not dependent on our pretensions of largesse or benevolence.

Borrows (2005) reminds us that the original relationship agreed to between settlers and Indigenous Peoples was based on the idea of intermingling British and Indigenous law. While Indigenous Peoples stressed peaceful co-existence, non-interference, and sustainable co-relations, our Canadian forefathers deemed that treaties would spell out the historical ongoing relationship between settlers and Indigenous Peoples. In his opening comments at Fort Carlton in 1876, during the negotiation of Treaty 6, Canadian Lieutenant Alex Morris⁵ made the following statement: "[W]hat I will promise, and what I believe and hope you will take, is to last as long as that sun shines and yonder river flow" (Stonechild & Waiser, 1997). The Canadian government's promises, made on the Canadian people's behalf and codified in treaties, are binding and exist in perpetuity. Yet, we have continuously failed to honor these legal instruments that are the backbone of the Canadian nation.

Our legacy as 21st century Canadians is compliance and willful silence in the face of generations of policy and legislation designed to prevent Indigenous People from maintaining and practicing their languages and cultures, forming and maintaining families, deriving economic benefit and sustenance from their lands and resources, and escaping the gaze of criminalization. In order to ensure our liberty and prosperity, Canadian settlers have offered little or no resistance to the legalized form of apartheid developed and maintained by the government, which guarantees, through the *Indian Act* and reserve system, the oppression, impoverishment, and isolation of Indigenous nations. On a daily basis, provincial education systems and national media perpetuate this Eurocentric version of Canadian history that is largely silent with reference to the colonial and racialized basis of Canadian and settler privilege. Even in this digital age, instant access to vast stores of knowledge at our fingertips has brought little change to the state of willful ignorance needed to remain indifferent to our atrocities against Aboriginal Peoples. We have demonstrated tenacity and perseverance in our willingness to nurture delusions of national identity, even in the face of the punishing truth of historical record.

NURTURING DENIAL AND IGNORANCE

Despite our best efforts, there is no way of denying that we have taken far more than what was offered to us by Indigenous Peoples and tried to prevent their continuing

existence as nations of distinct peoples. Canadians experience an uncomfortable dissonance between our democratic, liberal values and the racism and colonization that is foundational to our society (Henry and Tator, 1992). Nurturing ignorance is one of the ways that we cope with our desire to assert a positive national identity without having to engage with the overwhelming evidence of our greed, theft, and callous disregard for Indigenous Peoples. The construction and maintenance of this willful ignorance depends on several inter-related mechanisms that uphold the spatial Native and racialized boundaries (Razack, 2002) that separate Native from settlers:

1. Psychic distancing: Here I am referring to the degree of emotional detachment that Canadians must maintain in order to deny the real and intimate history we share with Indigenous Peoples and our roles as enactors of colonial brutality (Breuster, 2006). This distance is supported by a racialized binaries that marks the "settler" and "native" as distinct categories, in which the former always represents what is desirable (e.g., modern versus primitive, civilized versus savage, educated versus illiterate, evolved versus atavistic).

2. Cognitive imperialism: Mi'kmaw scholar Marie Battiste (2000) defines this as "a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values" (p. 198). In Canada, Eurocentrism is naturalized, advanced, and empowered through public education and media as the singular path to rational enquiry (Graveline, 1998) and, therefore, as the only reasonable framework for interpreting Canadian history. Eurocentric education is framed as secular and inclusive of information imported from other societies and cultures, but non-European contributions to human development are denied, disguised or reconfigured so as to attribute this knowledge to European societies (Ahluwalia, 2009). This solidifies settler ignorance and arrogance, teaches us to interpret and maintain hierarchies of difference, and results in the internalization of ideologies that justify oppression and deny Indigenous Peoples their rights to maintain their languages, knowledge systems, and epistemologies.

3. Collective denial: This is a common response from societies accused of genocide and unearned privileges (Balmain & Drawmer, 2009). This term is useful for considering the ways that Canadians are taught to forget, repress, or dissociate from colonial oppression and destruction carried out through official state policy, deliberate cover-ups, and the re-writing of history from the colonizer's perspective (Cohen, 2001).⁶

4. Historical amnesia: This cultural process undergirds capitalist accumulation by destroying local and Indigenous system of law and economy and replacing them with the monolithic presence of an outside perspective that values and naturalizes imperial conquest as it reconstructs, interprets, and obliterates the past. Jameson (1984) explains that advanced capitalist societies (such as Canada) have experienced “the disappearance of a sense of history in our lives” (p. 125) resulting in an inability to comprehend and reflect on our true history. Morgenthau (1964), being acutely aware of the way American governments play with the historical record to advance their political goals, notes that “[w]e must not confound the abuse of reality with reality itself.” If historical record is to be free of political interference, then we must accept Canadian classroom texts as an abuse of reality. History will surely mock our declarations of benevolence towards Indigenous Peoples.

STOLEN GENEROSITY: AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE ON SETTLER CONSCIOUSNESS

Carl Boneshirt, a member of the Sicangu Lakota Oyate⁷, offers another interpretation of the actions of Canadian settlers against their Indigenous hosts that requires us to consider the culturally specific meanings of generosity. Through my experiences of being married into a Lakota family, I have learned that Lakota people regard generosity as a foundational cultural practice. Practicing generosity is fundamental to a Lakota way of being, as my husband has explained to me (Boneshirt, 2011). My late mother-in-law would often remind me that generosity is manifested in one’s actions. A Lakota way of life teaches that practicing generosity is a way of manifesting one’s humanity. *Stolen generosity* (Boneshirt, 2011) is a term my husband uses to describe the behavior of settlers towards Indigenous Peoples. He explains that the generosity offered to settlers was not accepted; instead, it was seized and far more than what was ever offered was taken. The very generosity of Indigenous peoples was stolen and their ability to continue to practice generosity in sharing their territories was disrupted, thereby disrupting entire ways of life. When the American people stole Lakota lands and resources, they stole the very basis of Lakota generosity. Canadians, through our usurpation of Indigenous territories and resources, have stolen the generosity that Indigenous nations offered to us.

The generosity of being offered a home was not enough for the settlers. Governments used the pretext of a friendship to enter treaty negotiations and agreements that have yet to be honoured. They have seized land that was never offered in the treaties, moved settlers into vast tracts of land that have never been ceded by treaty, and

created borders and boundaries through Crown and privatized land arrangements that have made it impossible for Native nations to sustain themselves by accessing their resources and ceremonial sites. Another way to observe our willingness to steal generosity is the assertion of “non-Indigenous indigeneity” (Barman, 2011), that is, the re-constitution of Canadian settlers as the Native sons and daughters on this “our home and native land.” Our attempts to steal the very identities of Native Peoples may explain why we continue to struggle to assert our own identity as Canadians (Mackey, 1999). Indigenous Peoples’ rights to self-determination have been stolen, as have their rights to exist, not as a mass of atomized and assimilated individuals, but as members of nations with long cultural histories, lands, resources, languages, and futures. My husband describes it this way:

In some treaties, they say that we can continue to go anywhere we want but, in fact, there are all kinds of borders that keep us from going wherever it is that we need to get to. They have reneged on their treaties where they say that they will let Lakota people do what we need to do in our own territorial grounds. Today we cannot move about freely to do the things we need to do and we can’t get anywhere. That’s stolen generosity. They reneged on their treaties that said that our people would continue to do what we have done for eons, since time immemorial. And that’s stolen generosity. They took our rights away and made their rights higher than our rights. They bring in a military that is armed with weapons, another form of stolen generosity, and they violate our human rights, civil rights, and land rights [...] and our voices are never heard in public. We, the natives of this continent, do not have to say “land claim” because we are a part of the land and the land is part of us. We already know we are a part of this land, we do not have to claim it. (Boneshirt, 2012)

CONCLUSION: TRUTH-TELLING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, RESTITUTION, AND RECONCILIATION

Recently, Canada has joined other settler nations around the world in establishing processes of truth telling and reconciliation. In 2008, Prime Minister Harper apologized to Aboriginal Peoples for the residential school system that tortured and scarred generations of Native children and caused irreparable damage to Indigenous nations and languages. Harper noted that Indigenous

Peoples have born the burden of this brutal chapter of our history for too long when, in fact, “the burden is properly ours as a government and country” (Harper, 2008). And yet, the government has done nothing to lead Canadian settlers in examining our responsibilities in the truth-telling process. Our government has offered no strategies to help Canadians move past denial and our desire to not know. Most of the testimonies gathered to date by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada have been given by survivors of residential schools, who, in some cases, have repeatedly bared their souls and scars, reliving the horrors and tortures they experienced, while a seemingly indifferent Canadian settler population ignores the testimonies or pretends that such institutions were there to help Aboriginal Peoples. Why is the truth-telling process not expanding beyond the memories of starvation, torture, abuse, linguicide, and spiritual destruction? Where is the government leadership, resources and encouragement for gathering Canadian settler testimonies of domination, violence, racism, and indifference to human suffering? When will Canadians admit our crimes against humanity so that we can begin the process of healing ourselves from the oppressive behaviour that we continue to enact against Native Peoples? When will we begin the work of gathering and documenting the statements of Canadian settlers who will admit “I did this,” “I was indifferent to the abuse and murder,” “I stood idly by and waited for someone else to end the horror,” or “my taxes and the taxes of my forefathers paid for these systems of torture and abuse”?

The exclusion of Indigenous voices in mainstream Canadian institutions impoverishes our national memory and increases our historical amnesia. Furthermore, our collective denial inhibits the process of truth telling, which is the first step to justice, restitution, and reconciliation. We must listen to the voices and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples, for only they can help us identify and deconstruct the skewed perceptions of one-sided scholarship replete with what many Indigenous People believe to be the hallmarks of Western thought and education: “manipulations, misunderstandings, misinterpretations and mistranslations” (Boneshirt, 2012). We need education that promotes decolonized thought in order to access multiple perspectives in our collective histories, not only for new immigrants to Canada, but also for Canadians whose families have been here for many generations. We must engage in meaningful social action that brings a diversity of community members together and makes Indigenous knowledge and experience central to understanding who we are as Canadians.

It is time to reset the frame, move beyond overt and veiled attempts to maintain our policy of “extermination by assimilation,” and abandon the questions currently fueling jobs for Canadian academics, such as how well

Indigenous Peoples are assimilating to our norms, how we can speed up the process of dispossession, and what we can do to make Indian People more compliant with our goals for taking what is left of Indian lands. We must work to destroy the harmful myths that prevent us from accepting responsibility for our crimes against Indigenous nations and repair the damage caused by the severing of law from justice in Canadian culture so that we may return the resources and jurisdictional control that Native nations need to address the problems in their communities (Monture-Okanee, 1994). Canadian settlers need to restore all that we have stolen from Native Peoples: their land rights, their languages and cultures, and their rights to education, health, welfare, security, and economic well-being, as guaranteed in treaties. Indigenous Peoples should never have to reconcile themselves to a continued relationship of stolen generosity. Canadians need to develop the courage to face the truth of our colonial motivations, goals, and exploits. Truth telling, justice, and restitution lead the way to reconciliation that supports peaceful coexistence (Alfred, 2005) and there is an urgent need to move forward with this work. The urgency stems from the need to stop the genocidal policies and practices that continue to affect the lives of Indigenous People every day. As my husband says:

Native kids [...] face mental, spiritual, and ideological genocide every day. Our children need to know that there is still a nation that is still together, that people still practice their way of life and die for it, too [...]. Despite the myth of the vanishing Indian, there are many Indians who do know their roots, and many Indian ways are not lost. [...] kids in urban centers don't feel a link because many were taken from the reservation and adopted into white families [...] they are imposing a way of life on our children that was never meant for them [...] they tried to commit spiritual genocide on us, but when that didn't work, they turned to mental, physical, sexual abuse [...] but this abuse of our people has also had the effect of deteriorating the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the dominant race. If there is no genocide, then why do Indian people have to live with dehumanization every day, in so many ways? We just want foreigners to understand that we are human beings and want to live the way that was meant for us [...] our ceremonial ways bring peace and justice, and are there so that the people may live (Boneshirt, 2007).

It is time to move beyond stolen generosity. Settlers, old and new, must come to terms with our truth, that “what we choose to deny is our complicity in perpetuating a colonial system that is rooted in violence and social injustice” (Regan, 2006, p. 22). The ideological power of the myth of Canadians as ‘benevolent peacemakers’ cannot erase the truth of our malevolent peace breaking, nor can it help heal us of our oppressive ways. (Regan, 2010) The job of re-humanizing ourselves, and those who have been victimized by our colonial pursuits, requires the moral strength of those brave enough to face the truth. To paraphrase the words of the great Lakota Chief Sitting Bull, let us join our hearts and minds together and see what kind of a world we can make for our children.

NOTES

- ¹ Because there is no one single term that is universally acceptable to all Indigenous People, in this paper I use a variety of different terms that Indigenous People use to talk about themselves in the English language, including Indigenous, Indian, Aboriginal, and First Peoples. I variously refer to both Indigenous People and Indigenous Peoples, the former term referring to a person of Indigenous descent, the latter referring to Indigenous nations. Despite the colonial stereotype of “Aboriginals” or “Indians,” this continent has been continuously occupied by many geographically specific and culturally dynamic Indigenous nations who have resided in the same territories for thousands of years.
- ² Philosopher Iris Young (1990) notes that oppression is constituted from the “structural phenomena that immobilize or diminish a group” (p. 42) including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.
- ³ Castanha (1999) observes that an assumption of universalism is evident in 15th century Papal bulls that played a central role in the subjugation of Indigenous Peoples. This was done by presenting them as pagans who were enemies of Christendom and, therefore, unworthy of keeping their territories, thus paving the way for the Christian usurpation of their lands. The papal bulls—known as *Dum Diversas* (1452), *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), and *Inter Caetera* (1493)—form the basis of the Doctrine of Discovery, which remains a significant legal tool for claiming eminent domain and plenary powers for Indigenous Peoples and territories. For more information see Newcomb’s (2008) *Pagans in the Promised Land. Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery*.
- ⁴ Aboriginal land rights are *sui generis* (i.e., unique), inherent, and collective. Aboriginal title confers jurisdiction over and access to an Indigenous People’s ancestral territories. Canada does not grant these rights because these rights pre-exist Canada and result from Indigenous Peoples’ “occupation of and relationship with their home territories as well as their ongoing social structures and political and legal systems. [...] Aboriginal title and rights are separate from rights afforded to non-Aboriginal Canadian citizens under Canadian common law.” (Hanson, 2010).
- ⁵ Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris represented the Canadian government in negotiations for Treaties 3, 4, 5, and 6. Talbot (2009) notes that, subsequently, Morris endured many conflicts with the government as a result of their failure to implement the treaties in good faith and with due process.
- ⁶ For a full discussion of state-organized collective denial, see Cohen’s (2001) *States of Denial. Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*: 132–33.
- ⁷ In English, the Sicangu Lakota Oyate are referred to as the Rosebud Sioux Indian Tribe and their territories centre on the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota.

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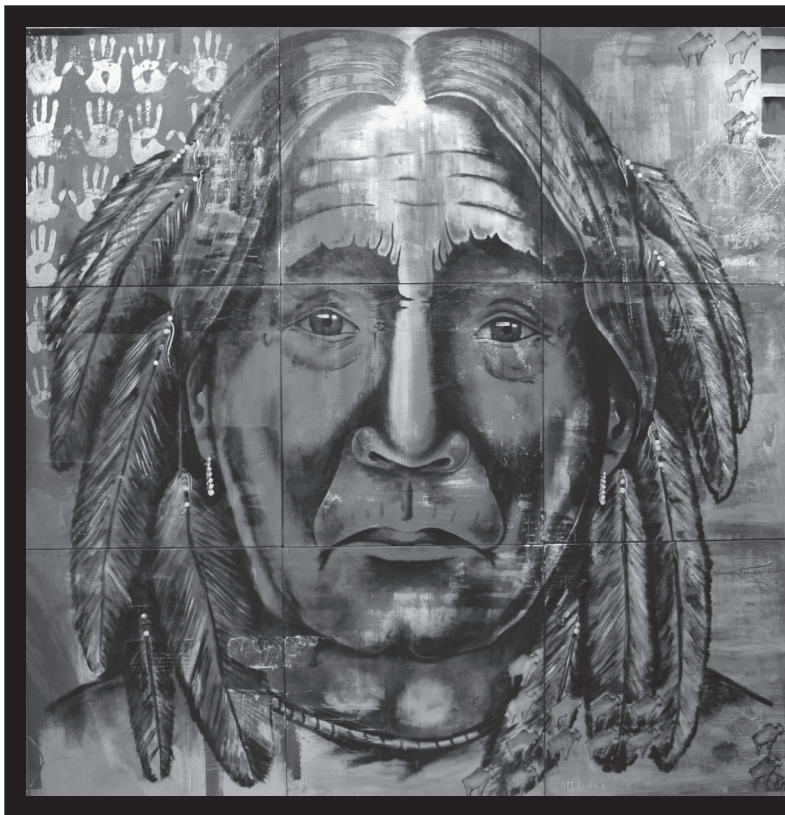
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