UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
FACULTY OF NATIVE STUDIES

Indigenous Canada:

Looking Forward/Looking Back

Cover Image: Artwork by Leah Dorion

The University of Alberta acknowledges that we are located on Treaty 6 territory and respects the history, languages, and cultures of the First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and all First Peoples of Canada, whose presence continues to enrich our institution.

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Module 11 Introduction

This module begins by taking a theoretical approach to the notion of community and exploring what community means in relation to Indigenous peoples' values. Often the formation of a community is a natural progression that evolves and adapts to the needs of the people involved. It is based on a shared sense of unity amongst a group of people. Amalgamating as a group can consist of multiple reasons that are valued to enact this collectivity (Corntassel 2003). There are various kinds of communities with different functions. Building a sense of community can take multiple forms that can be more figurative, social, or based on geography (Wilson 2008).

For many Indigenous societies, there is a great emphasis on the value of community, the community's relationships and the practice of reciprocity within it. Relationships among the members of a community follow a practice of respect and may involve specific elements and rules on membership. For example, one cannot just choose to become a member of Montreal Lake Cree Nation, as there are membership guidelines one must adhere to. The practice of reciprocity requires members to give back to the community when they take something, or when they need some form of assistance (Wilson 2008).

There are multiple ways in which to understand community. Indigenous nations are peoples with complex political, cultural, spiritual, and social systems that were in place prior to European contact. These rights, responsibilities, and freedoms are further recognized by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Champagne 2013 and United Nations 2008).

Figure 1 United Nations General Assembly; Credit: Ajay Goyal

An Indigenous nation may see itself as a community, but there are many types of communities that are not nations in this respect. Nations may be communities; however, mythic, temporary invented, and ongoing invented communities may not form nations.

Section One: Community

Mythic, Sited, Temporary Invented, and Ongoing Invented Communities

One way to look at the various kinds of communities can be divided into mythic, sited, temporary invented, and ongoing invented communities. There are also multiple levels of communities. As a result, the formation of any kind of community creates a sense of identity (Martin 2004).

A **mythic community** consists of a range of people who have shared values or experiences. For instance, an Indigenous global community includes Indigenous peoples across the globe that share commonalities and experiences based on their histories of colonialism (Martin 2004). This creates a sphere of commonality that comes from similar forms of oppression, dispossession of land, and fights for Indigenous rights (Anderson and Lawrence 2012, 12). However, the concern with this kind of community is that it creates a broad unifying category. This large grouping of a community can diminish the distinctions among members that erase or override other important aspects about a group of people. In other words, an Indigenous global community risks overgeneralizing Indigenous people based on this one common principle theme of unification.

A **sited community** is a group of people that already share a sense of unity either by location, by functioning under similar operations, or by thriving for a common goal (Martin 2004). An example of a sited community united by location would be Nehiyawak from the Plains, or Inuit from the northern Tundra. For Indigenous societies that lived a mobile lifestyle, they were still connected to an area, which was known as their traditional territory (Champagne 2013). An example of a sited community united by an

operational function is the Native Studies Student Association at University of Alberta. This group represents students in Native Studies and builds a sense of community on campus. Finally, an example of a sited community united by a common goal would be people coming together for social or political activism. Each of these scenarios creates a community based on different ties of unity.

A **temporary invented community** creates a one-time feeling of unity, a group or organization that is considered operational (Martin 2004). It is formed based on a short-term project, as compared to an **ongoing invented community**, which is similar but remains functioning overtime.

Figure 2 National Aboriginal Day, 2014; Credit: University of the Fraser Valley

For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) created an ongoing invented community, bringing together residential school survivors, family members experiencing intergenerational trauma, and others indirectly impacted by Indian residential schools (Dickason 2009, 311–13). These historical memories and experiences of intergenerational trauma from residential schools mobilized this ongoing effort to acknowledge, share and heal. Even though the last TRC event was held in 2014, the mandate to carry out the recommendations and initiatives given in the TRC report still remains ("TRC Executive Summary" 2015).

Community is based on a common unity, which brings together people of various and distinct backgrounds. Communities form for multiple reasons and actions that provide a place of belonging and identity. Specific examples of Indigenous peoples coming together based on traditional structures, and contemporary formations as collective activisms, can provide a fuller understanding around the formation of communities.

Formations of Communities

Indigenous peoples' traditional formations of communities come in many shapes and forms. They can be divided into cultural, tribal, clan, or even kinship relations communities (Anderson 2011, 28–37).

One way of understanding a community is based on the continuation of collective memories and histories that uphold their connection of unity. Lesson One told the oral creation stories of Wisacejack and Sky Woman and how the practice of retelling stories over generations helps Indigenous cultural communities sustain a sense of unity over time.

Indigenous kinship systems are another form of community (St. Onge and Podruchny 2012, 59). Many Indigenous societies have blended families that integrate persons who are not necessarily an immediate or extended relative, giving this member access to what this family community has to offer. This allows everyone to benefit from a family community, which functions as treating one, or loving one, as their own kin (Anderson 2011, 171–79).

Figure 3 Artwork by Brenda Morency; Credit: Brenda Morency

Another example of this family community is seen in the Inuit kinship system where families lived together and relied on one another in order to survive in northern regions. Inuit families created their own communities where they depended on the networks of family by performing specific roles (Dombrowski et al. 2013, 89–104). Settler

colonialism dismantled Inuit extended family kinship systems and replaced it with the nuclear family structure a system of heteropatriarchy and capitalism. Throughout the process of colonization there has been the pressure to adapt to such nuclear family units. Indigenous peoples kinship systems, such as Inuit families, are dynamic and complex and better fit the notion of a social community (Grey 2010).

These are a few examples of **social communities** that many Indigenous peoples may have in common. There are cultural communities that share collective memories through the practice of oral tradition. There are also other characteristics of communities that distinguish between Indigenous peoples, such as specific territories, tribes, and clans. Examining more contemporary examples through Indigenous people's collective action for social justice and environmental activism, one can begin to understand how and why social communities form.

Influences Building Communities

The above examples of traditional social communities in Indigenous societies help with understanding community from an Indigenous perspective. Contemporary examples of social and environmental activism illustrate some of the reasons in which social communities form. These upcoming examples show that individuals can share a common goal and purpose, building relations among a diverse group of people coming from different backgrounds (Hill 2010).

Many social justice and political activist movements form social communities that bring people together to fight for specific causes. The many protests and marches for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirited Peoples (MMIW) have aligned many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to push for social justice against gendered colonial violence.

Figure 4 Two sprit pride, 2011; Credit: Steven Damron

Over the decades, marches and vigils held for MMIW have created a social movement (NWAC 2016). Participants who are currently involved and socially active hold a communal memory of the past and demand call to action for the present colonial violence. This social issue has brought people inside and outside the Indigenous community together to commemorate the missing and murdered victims.

For environmental activism, a collective group is made up of people's shared values, whether they've come together to protect the land or demand clean water (Bédard 2008, 89-110; Willow 2009; Pedelty 2016, 1-22). Building of alliances within a group of people creates unity, because it involves being around likeminded individuals who share a common view about a certain cause. The Idle No More movement founded in 2012 is another example of collective engagement, as it is a large social community that has expanded beyond national boundaries and gained international support. Idle No more has brought people together from across the globe who share a common belief and goal to protect the land and Indigenous rights. This is an example of a figurative community, based on a collective support for the environment, through social media, protests, roadblocks, round dance flash mobs, and other events that took place this movement gained traction. Many scholars have connected both social and environmental movements, how control over and violence against Indigenous women's bodies and the land have been an ongoing colonial conquest (Graveline 2012; Barker 2015).

Societal Concerns

In 2014, there was a People's Climate March that took place in New York City with thousands of people that formed solidarity to advocate for the protection of the environment and to stop climate change (USA Today 2014). This march, described as an Indigenous climate activism mobilized by Indigenous peoples from different parts of the world, created a figurative social community that united voice. It engaged this Indigenous global community that created a form of social community based on alliances with non-Indigenous peoples protesting for environmental protection. Often social media outlets have been utilized to form a social community in these forms of

activism, especially media campaigns for defending the land and work against climate change.

Social and environmental concerns motivate people to come together as a community. This form of activism is based on Indigenous collective memories that reflect experiences of colonial oppression. In some cases, this political activism, as a form of social community, involves the building of relations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Although Idle No More began as an Indigenous social movement, it soon expanded to include non-Indigenous allies (Graveline 2012).

Section Two: Resistance

Grassroots Resistance

Communities can come in the form of Indigenous resistance through grassroots movements. A grassroots movement can be a community-driven effort aimed at bringing attention to social issues (Batliwala 2002). They begin at the local level with a few passionate volunteers, and sometimes they gain national or even international attention.

A grassroots resistance may involve following one's own Indigenous legal orders and cultural approaches when dealing with political or social conflicts. For instance, in 2012 the Apache Corporation planned to install the Pacific Trails Pipeline on land that included a First Nations group's unceded territories.

Figure 5 Pipeline, 2010; Credit Brian Cantoni

Chief Toghestiy of the Wet'suwet'en intervened by offering an eagle feather to the crew leader of the surveyors, Can-Am Geomatics Company, telling them to leave (Vancouver Media Co-op 2012). This act of giving an eagle feather is a practice of the

Wet'suwet'en law to peacefully warn trespassers. Chief Tohestiy was following Bi Kyi Wa'at'en, which is a specific Wet'suwet'en Inuk nu'ot'en (law) where it is the husband's duty to protect his wife's territory, as this is seen as her sovereign territory. In general, efforts to stop pipelines from being developed on Indigenous peoples' traditional lands have often involved in this type of grassroots resistance.

The five clans within the Wet'suwet'en nation are meant to manage and protect the lands in order to ensure that future generations will have a healthy and well-sustained environment. The Unist'ot'en Camp creates a resistance community that has the mandate to serve and watch over the lands of the Wet'suwet'en (Barker and Myers Ross 2017, 205–210). In 2012, they were able to block off the Apache Corporation from building the pipeline with the communication between Unist'ot'en and Wet'suwet'en. In the end, Unist'ot'en built an actual community right in the area of interest for pipeline companies as another tactic of prevention (Barker and Myers Ross 2017, 205).

Oka Crisis

In 1990, an Indigenous grassroots movement took root in Quebec that quickly took centre stage on newscasts throughout the country and became known as the Oka Crisis (York and Pindera 1999 and Hedican 2013, 109). The Oka Crisis involved forceful and armed tensions among members of the Mohawk nation (Kanienkehaka, meaning people of the flint), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP, Canada's national police force enforcing federal law), and the Canadian army (Miller 2000, 380). The catalyst for the crisis was the announcement of a golf course development by the mayor of Oka, Quebec. The plan included the expansion of a golf course and construction of a residential area on Mohawk reserve land and was approved without consultation or the consent of the Mohawk people (Swain 2010, 67–69).

The site in question was a part of a longstanding land claim that encompassed a Mohawk burial site, which had been a controversial topic for decades. In 1961, before the first nine holes of the original golf course were built, the Mohawk people had fought unsuccessfully to stop it (Swain 2010, 68). In 1989 when the expansion plan was first

announced, it brought back bad memories for the Mohawk. This spurred the Mohawk to set up a small protest camp in the spring of 1990 on an area of the property known as the Pines. The group of protesters began to grow, and even though the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Indian Affairs echoed the Mohawk's concerns, construction was scheduled to begin (Hedican 2013, 111).

The Mohawk decided to launch a more vocal protest, as well as setting up a blockade on the access road to the property. People took notice, because development was being threatened and costing people money. Lines were drawn in the sand, people took sides, and suddenly a crisis was born that would result in major political repercussions (Hedican 2013, 112–113).

Oka Crisis Intensifies

As the Oka Crisis grew in intensity, the Mohawk were supported by members of two other reserves, the Kahnawake and Akwesasne (Miller 2000, 382). After two court injunctions failed to persuade the protesters to remove the blockade, police were called in. On July 11, 1990, tear gas and concussion grenades were employed, and gunfire was exchanged (Hedican 2013, 111). A police officer was killed, which compelled the police to retreat.

Figure 6 Canadian soldier Patrick Cloutier and Saskatchewan Native Brad Laroque alias "Freddy Kruger" come face to face in a tense standoff at the Kahnesatake reserve in Oka, Que., Saturday September 1, 1990; Credit: THE CANADIAN PRESS/Shaney Komulainen

The resistance grew and became increasingly hostile when members of the nearby Kahnawake reserve blockaded the Mercier bridge (Miller 2000, 382). The blockade had two major impacts. The first major impact was that access to Montreal was cut off from the southern suburbs, making it difficult to get around. The second impact was that food trucks and basic supplies were not getting to the protesters.

Though the Mohawk had non-Indigenous supporters, tensions continued to grow from others who did not support them. Many people blamed government and police for the trouble (Swain 2010, 101). Eventually through negotiations the Mercier bridge was reopened, but residents attempting to leave the reserve area were treated with hostility.

Oka Crisis Conclusion

The Québec Minister of Native Affairs at the time, John Ciaccia, supported the Mohawk, but the Mayor of Oka did not heed his suggestions (Hedican 2013, 111). Demonstrations took place across the country in support of the Mohawk, which had the upside being an increased awareness of the plight of Indigenous peoples with respect to land and treaty rights. The end result of this conflict went in favour of the Mohawk, as the golf course expansion plans were cancelled, and the federal government agreed to buy the land and give it to the Mohawk (Swain 2010 160–182).

What makes this Indigenous protest fall under the lines of a grassroots movement was that it called upon the Mohawk clan mothers to intervene on the front lines of the protest. This movement relied upon their traditional matriarchal system to mobilize and organize (Ahooja, Burrill, and Higgins 2010). The threat of construction on their traditional territory called on the Mohawk's traditional practice of women taking care of the community. The significance of the women elders' participation is an act of fulfilling their responsibility as clan mothers who look after the entire community by making the decisions. Other members of the Kahnawake and Akwesasne joined in on this protest, establishing this as a community of resistance (Miller 2000, 380). The local police were unable to dislodge the Mohawk because of the presence of the Mohawk Warrior Society. The seriousness of the confrontation of Oka was intensified when the Canadian army deployed (Swain 2010, 129).

What began as an act of resistance by the Mohawk became a nationwide story. This was about much more than a golf course. Indigenous people had been repeatedly denied their land since first contact. Many of promises had been broken, and respect had not been given to the people to whom the land rightfully belonged. One of the

outcomes of the Oka Crisis was the sweeping Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which conducted intensive research and reported in 1996 (Swain 2010, 167–169).

These examples of grassroots movements involve the practice of Indigenous peoples' ways of dealing with conflicts and disputes. Each one shows how members of a specific tribal nation, clan, and neighbours of a surrounding traditional territory formed a community of resistance. It demonstrates the allegiance of Indigenous peoples to prevent the further dispossession of lands (Simpson and Ladner 2010; Hedican 2013, 87–154).

Idle No More

The Idle No More movement was born on November 10, 2012, by four women from Saskatchewan. They were prompted to act because of the introduction of Bill C-45, which contained several troubling provisions (Wotherspoon and Hansen 2013, 23). Jessica Gordon, Sheelah McLean, Sylvia McAdam, and Nina Wilson were fed up with existing within government-sanctioned structures that continued to restrict the sovereignty and rights of all Indigenous peoples, and they decided to take a stand. They wanted Indigenous lands to be protected and knew that someone needed to step up, or soon there would be nothing left to save (Barker 2015, 47).

Figure 7 Two Native American protesters at an Idle No More round dance in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in solidarity with First Nations in Canada, 29 December 2012; Credit: Uyvski

Gordon, McLean, McAdam, and Wilson wanted to reframe the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. They wanted to exert pressure on the

government, raise awareness of inequalities across the country, and most importantly retain and strengthen their cultural values (Coates 2015).

The impact of colonization on Indigenous culture has been immeasurable. Idle No More is as much a movement for social justice as for political equity. The issues of Idle No More concerned amendments to three major pieces of legislation – the Indian Act; the Navigation Protection Act, and the Environmental Assessment Act (Coulthard 2012).

Bill C-45

At first glance, Bill C-45 would not appear to be overly controversial. However, considering the implications of the specific amendments, there were major areas of concern that catapulted Idle No More into action (Barker 2015, 47).

One area of concern was proposed changes to the Indian Act. A proposed change to the guidelines around voting to lease designated reserve lands was very controversial. This shift changed from a double majority rule, which means if there is not a majority of members at a first vote then a public notice needs to be posted in the community. A vote by the people in attendance happens at the second meeting, and only a majority vote of those in attendance is needed. Any unilateral amendments to the Indian Act, specifically these changes, without any consultation from Indigenous peoples would leave existing treaties and Indigenous rights in a vulnerable and perilous position.

Another proposed change was to the Navigation Protection Act (Government of Canada 1985). Major pipeline and power line project advocates would no longer be required to show proof that their projects wouldn't cause harm or destruction to a navigable waterway that it crosses, unless that waterway is on a list prepared by the transportation minister. Idle No More claims the change leaves 99.9% of lakes and rivers in Canada without necessary protection, exposing everyone to the risk of contamination of this precious resource.

Finally, there was a proposed amendment to the Environmental Assessment Act that would speed up the approval process for projects by significantly reducing the number of projects that would require environmental assessment (Government of Canada 2012). Obviously all these changes had the potential to cause a great deal of impact on Indigenous lands and the environment (Tupper 2014, 91).

Year after year government changes to laws and policies reinforced the notion that Indigenous rights had no meaning or value. Gordon, McLean, McAdam, and Wilson stood up and were heard. They did not stand idly by and let others control the agenda. As they stood, others stood with them, drawing national attention. With a strong will, a grassroots social movement was created to draw attention to the plight of the Indigenous as well as the common threat to Canada's natural wonders (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014 and Coates 2015).

Section Three: Social Media

Social Media Benefits

As much as anyone across the globe, Indigenous people participate and engage with online cyber technologies. From blogs to Instagram to YouTube and other platforms, Indigenous people use social media to express themselves.

Social media platforms have become forums for Indigenous peoples to create virtual online identities, from a singular individual identity to online communities and large networking organizational identities.

Figure 8 . Social media icons; Credit: Brantley Davidson

Indigenous cyberspace activism has increased exponentially in the last ten years (William and Hackett 2006). Increasingly, Indigenous people turn to social media to raise awareness, advocate, and mobilize strategies for organizing and carrying out activist projects. Extremely accessible, online social

networking sites serve as a digital platform that enables users to participate in politics like never before (Tupper 2014, 90).

Digital technology and the social media phenomenon profoundly changed the implementation and execution of Indigenous political and sociocultural activism. While conventional forms of activism, such as writing letters, sharing information about rallies and protests, word of mouth, and signing petitions by hand are still common, many events today are only promoted through social media. Communication and transference of knowledge and information through Facebook groups, hashtags on Twitter, photographs on Instagram, and electronic petitions is unrivalled in agility and velocity (Tupper 2014, 91–92).

The cyberspace of digital media offers Indigenous political activism many advantages, including the organization of information to plan protests and events and mobilization and coordination of actions (Barker 2015, 51–52). These platforms further the opportunity for people to unite in solidarity and encourage more people to engage in political discourse.

Indigenous people are accessing the platform of online digital media to grow grassroots political movements from small, localized areas to large national and international movements. For example, due in part to the mobilizing proficiency of social media, Idle No More became one of the largest Indigenous mass movements ever recorded. The Idle No More movement began with four women in Saskatchewan and expanded globally. The lengthy, interactive discourse from the chronological feed from the hashtag #IdleNoMore on Twitter reveals the massive engagement of this media campaign. Examples like Idle No More reveal the potential for Indigenous people to capitalize on the use of social media platforms (Barker 2015, 50).

Shifting Focus

Indigenous peoples' use of information communications technologies facilitates dialogues on nationhood and self-determination between Indigenous peoples across the nation. Social media platforms have enabled Indigenous peoples to establish wide networks to communicate concerns or conflicts with governments, industries, and corporations. The proliferation of digital technology allows Indigenous peoples the opportunity to resist and develop strategies to overcome oppressive social conditions.

For Indigenous peoples, social media has opened up new ways to socially interact with likeminded individuals locally and globally. Indigenous peoples coordinate networks of communities to form unique bonds of resistance and social mobilization (McMillan, Young, and Peters 2013, 430). Twitter is an example of internetworking in which academic scholars, political figures, activists, organizers, and Canadian citizens voice their thoughts and opinions. These accounts can be seen across a wide variety of social issues. From accounts like ReconciliationCanada (@Rec_Can), who promote reconciliation between Indigenous people and all Canadians, to @hgCoASt, an informal group of people living on Haida Gwaii who are opposing the Supertanker traffic in BC waters, Twitter becomes an information superhighway.

Indigenous activists create decolonial social spaces online, and often these websites, listserves, blogs, and channels become major informational hubs for Indigenous-related politics and grassroots social media.

Social Media Critics

The critics of social media have argued that there are risks involved in online Indigenous activism. While social media has been extremely successful in promoting and advocating for Indigenous rights, it may have detrimental long term effects. Some critics question the ways in which Indigenous people may view their activism and political engagement. While there are multiple levels of political and social online activism, many people may participate only minimally by, for example, joining a Facebook group or sharing a link (Shirky 2011 38). While still involved, this engagement

in online activism may give a false sense of accomplishment and have very little overall effect. The long-term effects of low-level online engagement on social media may be seen if it becomes a replacement to offline participation. For any permanent beneficial changes to take place for Indigenous peoples, activism in cyberspace and activism on the street are equally important. Neither should be a substitute for the other.

As well, the self-centered media production of a self-promoting individual could distort or undermine the collective message. Previous lessons have explained that successful Indigenous communities have systems of accountability and responsibility embedded within the fabric of the community. Indigenous systems of accountability are rarely practiced or are absent online, making online communities and forums challenging to moderate and control. Comments on public forums can become battlegrounds for attacks on Indigenous people. Anonymous commenters, often known as Internet trolls, spew inflammatory remarks meant to provoke arguments. Trolls fill the comments section of online Indigenous themed stories with hateful and racist opinions and ignorance. For example, the vitriolic hatred and racism displayed in the comments became too difficult for CBC online to moderate, so in November 2015 they made the difficult decision to close all the comments sections for any stories related to Indigenous peoples (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2015). Mainstream media is controlled by the dominant society that produces colonial discourses and upholds power structures.

Conclusion

Acting as a form of resistance, social media creates democratic engagement and conducts political participation allowing individuals to join in otherwise inaccessible conversations. Today social media gives Indigenous activists the ability to create a space for meaningful discourse. Social media also increases an individual's agency and autonomy to participate in communication platforms.

Figure 9 Idle No More gathering at a shopping centre, 23 December, 2012; Credit: Tiffany Joseph

The new social world of Indigenous resistance relies upon traditional and online forms of communication. Cyberspace expands the ability to promote social activism and engage in political debates in order to mobilize the political will of Indigenous peoples.

Credits

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