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As Long as the Grass Grows: Walking, Writing, and Singing Treaty Education

Sheena Koops

TREATY WALKING AND SONGWRITING

I am sitting on a comfy rose chair in my home, black guitar strapped around my neck. I look onto a hill of aspen, glowing with sunlit snow. Beneath the snow there is green grass, and at the bottom of the coulee, the ice on Mission Lake will melt soon, flowing down the Qu'Appelle Valley in Treaty Four Territory near Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, Canada.

It is late January, 2015. In my journal I have written, "As Long as the Grass Grows: A Treaty Song from Saskatchewan." I am preparing my presentation, "Treaty Walks: An Unsettling Journey from Bully to Benevolence and White Back Again," for February's Provoking Curriculum Studies Conference in Vancouver (Koops, 2015). I am a settler-descendant Canadian learning about Treaties.

In July 2011, I had written in my morning pages, "I should get in better shape. I should walk to school for a year. And as I walk, I should meditate on the Treaties." In 2008, the Saskatchewan government mandated Treaty Education; however, I knew nothing about the Treaties. In fact, my master's thesis, *Blue Eyes Remembering Toward Anti-Racist Pedagogy* (Koops, 2007), examined my whiteness, living on and off reserve, but I never mentioned Treaties.

On August 29, 2011, I wrote my first *Treaty Walks* blog post, and the next morning I walked—the first of 200 walks to and from school—through the heart of Treaty Four territory, meditating on the Treaties. The next year I *Treaty-Walked*

about 100 times, and since then, Treaty awareness walks with me everywhere, but I seldom take time to blog. I am overwhelmed with Treaty awareness. How can I continue to write for two, three, four hours per day to unpack this growing reality?

Here I sit, with my guitar on my knee, trying to pull my Treaty story together. Trying to say something I've not been able to say for two years now.

The chorus has a simple, minor tune, built on a poetic *hendiatris*, attributed to Lieutenant Governor Morris, the Crown's Treaty negotiator: "As long as the grass grows, as long as the sun shines, as long as the river flows, through this *heart* of mine" (Koops, 2015). Then, in a second sweep of these lines, I replace *heart* with *land*. Just as the phrase "Peace, Order and good Government" (Constitution Act 1867, Section 91) articulates Canada's commitment to justice, this Treaty *hendiatris* is clear; the Treaties are to be honoured forever. I continue into the first verse, establishing the significance of Treaty:

They are living documents, First Peoples and the Crown
Building blocks of Canada, to which we are bound
Sacred agreements, the pipe and the pen
Brother to Brother, peace—good order to men.

I am especially happy with "the pipe and the pen." First Nations peoples have explained the spirituality of the pipe to us, and we, as settler-descendants, hold our signatures sacred, our contracts, our word.

The second verse further quotes Morris in a found poem, recorded in the Office of the Treaty Commissioner (OTC) (2008):

My Indian brothers of the plains, I shake hands with you today,
I shake hands in my heart, God has given us a good day.
I trust His eye is upon us, and all that we do,
will be for the benefit of His children, Lieutenant Governor Morris told this to ... [1]

In verse 3, Chief Ben Pasqua represents the other side of the iconic Treaty medal handshake. Keitha Brass, to whom I dedicated my *Treaty Walks*, is the great-granddaughter of this Treaty signator; she is the second-oldest of his living relatives. I have known Keitha for over 10 years, and she has become a big sister to me. I am learning more about her great-grandfather through the song in Bob Beal's (2007) article "An Indian Chief, an English Tourist, a Doctor, a Reverend, and a Member of Parliament: The Journeys of Pasqua's Pictographs and the Meaning of Treaty Four":

Chief Ben Pasqua, he was there, September 1874
On the Pasqua Pictograph, he documented Treaty Four
Now his great-granddaughter honours me as her friend.
We shake hands in our hearts, wîtaskêwin.

The next two verses, 4 and 5, tell the story that has led to our current Treaty reality:

But the Indian Act came along, Treaty broken across the land
Residential School stole the children, systemic racism played its hand
And the settlers, we closed our eyes, with worries of our own
And the Treaties we've forgotten, as history has shown.

Well, it's time we opened up our eyes, promise breakers be no more.
This land we call Canada, from shore to shore to shore
Is calling us to honour, our word, our law, our truth.
We are the seventh generation.[2] *If not us, then who?*

Verses 2 to 5 take us from the dream of Treaty to the tragedy of broken Treaty, and leave us with the question of responsibility. I have spent the last four years beginning to decolonize (Donald, 2012), unsettle (Regan, 2010), and indigenize (Pete, Schneider, & O'Reilly, 2013) our shared Canadian past, present, and future.

I end the chorus, "As long as the river flows, through this land of mine." I add an echo, "... of ours."

But the song is not finished. I want to use the three *Nêhiyaw-itwêwina* (Cree words of saying, or ways of expressing) from the OTC (2008)—*miyowîcêhtowin*, *pimâcihowin*, and *wîtaskêwin*—which were present at the Treaty negotiations; these concepts hold hope as we consider our Treaty responsibility.

Getting along with others, miyowîcêhtowin.
Making a living, pimâcihowin.
We are one with the land,[3] *wîtaskêwin.*
We are the people of Turtle Island, the Treaty makes us kin.

I sing the chorus once more, and the last line does not say "this land of mine" but is fully replaced by "this land of ours." I remember Terence Kasagan, a former student from Treaty Eight territory in Black Lake, who wrote a Facebook reply on October 7, 2013, "The land belongs to no man, we belong to the land," after my post, "Thank you for sharing the land." I have heard Terence's worldview before from Dene Elders.

GO FORTH AND BE AWKWARD

Soon report cards are on, and I am writing new blog posts for the 2015 conference in February. I know Kētē-ayah (Elder) Alma Poitras, a fluent *Nēhiyawak* speaker, and she has invited me to follow protocol with her any time I have a question, to bring a little tobacco to ask for her help in a good way. I should take Kētē-ayah Alma tobacco, I think, but now I am on the plane, heading for Vancouver, with no text or call to Alma. Maybe I will leave out the three *Nēhiyaw-itwēwina* at the conference.

I am singing my Treaty song in Vancouver. I pronounce the three *Nēhiyaw-itwēwina* incorrectly, and afterwards, I confess my mistakes. Julie Vaudrin-Charette from the University of Ottawa raises her hand and thanks me for teaching her the meaning of these indigenous words, and doing my best to pronounce them and situate them in context, as a first step of advocacy for indigenous language to thrive.

Back from the conference, I am cooking at Fort Qu'Appelle's fiddle camp during the Easter break. I get an email from Gord Barnes with Regina's Amnesty International Human Rights Radio with an invitation to be a guest that Friday in Regina.

As I am driving into Regina for the radio show, I cannot bear the thought of not having at least started the conversation around the three *Nēhiyaw-itwēwina.* I pull over on the highway and text a friend, Mike Cook, my daughter's best friend's dad, and I text Kētē-ayah Alma Poitras; both are fluent in their dialects as *Nēhiyawak* speakers.

Within 15 minutes, both have answered my text. I pull over again to talk with Mike; I make phonetic notes; he then calls my phone, leaving a voicemail, enunciating the words so I will have backup on the radio. Alma also calls, and after talking for a bit, she reminds me of protocol and tells me a story about herself rushing through something. "That's when things unravel," she says.

When I am on the radio, I talk about the Treaties and settler-descendant responsibility. Then I sing the song, sing the words wrong, then use the story as an example of my awkwardness, my backwardness in being an ally, and the generosity of our Treaty partners.

The next week Kētē-ayah Alma and I meet for breakfast. Over coffee, I offer Alma tobacco and ask for her help. Alma's soft voice softens even more, and she explains how wonderful it is to follow this protocol and what good things will come.

We order bacon and eggs. Delma, Alma's sister, joins us. The sisters talk *Nēhiyawak,* and I see Alma pat the tobacco with her hand, and Delma says, "Ahh," and nods.

At a lull in the conversation, I pull out the lyrics and ask if I can read through them. The sisters nod and listen. They offer detailed explanations. "Treaties are not only for us, as humans, but also the animals, medicines, and plants, all living elements, all my relations are included in the concept of *miyowîcêhtowin*, in a caring relationship, giving back good things for the future, to even make sacrifices as we are getting along with others" (A. Poitras & D. Poitras, personal communication, April 2015).

The conversation between the sisters is animated as they discuss *pimâcihowin*. "*Pi-ma* means going about," says Alma. "Going about, living, at that time, there were no boundaries. Going from place to place; it must have been when they followed the buffalo. They weren't sedentary people. They made a living from season to season, moving to different areas" (A. Poitras & D. Poitras, personal communication, April 2015).

Soon we are talking about *wîtaskêwin*. I have used the phrase "Living together on the land" from my reading in the OTC (2008), but Kētē-ayah Alma and Delma prefer "We are one with the land." Alma explains, "The elements are most important, then the plant life, animal life, and then human life. We can't live without the elements, plant life, and animal life, but they don't need us to survive, but we are the ones that are doing all the damage" (A. Poitras, personal communication, April 2015).

We are now finished our breakfast.

"Let's go outside and I'll sing the song for you," I say.

These lovely sisters sit on the tailgate of my truck and I sing. The wind is blowing, trucks and cars are driving by on the highway. The women nod as the verses go by and soon join in on the chorus.

I get to the final verse and we stop, mid-song, and workshop the three *Nēhiyaw-itwēwina*. Sitting on the tailgate, singing, we laugh a lot, call ourselves Rock Stars.

As the sisters gain confidence in the rhythm of the song, and as we sing the last verse, "the treaty makes us kin," Alma shouts out in perfect timing, "*wâhkôhtowin*." She tells me that this is the word for kinship, for relationship.

SINGING TREATY EDUCATION

I play the song in my guitar class during circle time, the four *Nēhiyaw-itwēwina* written phonetically on the whiteboard. The kids strum and sing along. The majority of the class is indigenous: Métis, Nēhiyawak, Nahkawē (Saulteaux), and Dakota (Sioux). One boy and I are European settler-descendants. Two students are recent immigrants from Korea. For our final assessment my students and I

have organized a coffee house performance, and each of us will choose one song. I choose my Treaty song.

It is the beginning of July and I have been invited to return to Human Rights Radio; Kētē-ayah Alma and two of my students will join us: Yeongkwang, from Korea, and Felicity, whose family comes from Peepeekisis First Nation.

On air, we give tobacco to Kētē-ayah Alma and the interview begins in a good way. Alma explains the importance of *miyowîcêhtowin*, *pimâcihowin*, *witaskêwin*, and *wâhkôhtowin*. I confess my mispronunciation and protocol breach, but celebrate how far we have come. Then we sing the song.

Alma has invited me to a sweat, a prayer ceremony for her daughter Evelyn Poitras' Treaty Law School at First Nations University of Canada (FNUC) in Regina. We pray for the people, for our good relationships, for our families, and for the Treaties to be honoured. In the third round, in the dark and heat, I am asked to sing my song. I sit up straight. I sing every verse. I hear weeping. I hear "hei hei." I hear "mmm." After I am done with the song, I lie down in the darkness, my face close to the edge of the lodge where the air is one wisp less than smoldering.

"You have done things in a good way, now," says Alma at the end of round three. "Good things will come from that song. It will be different now."

At the Treaty Law School, we sit in a circle in the glass ceremonial tipi at FNUC. Kētē-ayah Alma is leading a pipe ceremony. We hear of reconciliation. We hear of broken families because of broken Treaties. In the afternoon, James Daschuk (2013) shares highlights from his book *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*. Alma and I share our song.

Before I know it, I am back in the classroom; I wonder if I can make a YouTube video with the song. I pull up pictures from *Treaty Walks*. Six hours later, I have not moved, but I have made my first video (see Koops, 2015).

The leaves are turning yellow. The Treaty Four Gathering is in town, celebrating the September 15, 1874, signing in Fort Qu'Appelle. I have made arrangements to teach from the grounds all week, a living library, in my new role as Teacher Librarian.

My Native Studies classes are big and diverse. In preparation for the gathering, I give my Grade 10 students copies of the Treaty song lyrics. I tune my guitar. They are not settling down. I wait. When they settle, I start, but the kids are restless. I stop. Tears in my eyes. "I cannot sing this song unless there is respect in the room," I say. I am scolding and it feels wrong. We are all unsettled. I pull up the YouTube video. The kids listen and then write 10 new things they have learned about Treaty Four.

At the Treaty Four Gathering, the trees are turning the hills orange and yellow. Kētē-ayah Alma has brought her small group of students from Ocean Man

First Nation, where she has been teaching for the past year; many Grade 8s flank Alma and me. We sing together. People wander by. Some stop to listen.

The fall turns into blustery winter and I am enjoying the energy that four interns are bringing to our staff. Brooklyn Orban, my husband's intern, tells me that she has made an Arts-Education activity from my song. When I visit the hallway display, I see Grade 9s have used the lyrics to make found poetry.

It is February again, 2016, when Yeongkwang asks me, "Mrs. Koops, are we all Treaty people?" I am surprised to learn that this is a question on the University of Saskatchewan's application. I remind him of the Treaty song from guitar class and we look at the lyrics.

I remember guitar class last spring. We practiced the song at least once a day, but at the coffee house, despite all the extra preparations, when the big performance came, I lost the words and lost my place in the song. I remember saying into the microphone, "Felicity, did I sing verse two yet?"

I remember Kētē-ayah Alma's sweat lodge. As she was making preparations, she occasionally asked her daughters, two of whom are also pipe carriers, if she had remembered the order correctly. "No," she told herself once, "I've done that backwards. But it's okay to make mistakes. This reminds us that we are pitiful people."

Alma's daughter Evelyn told me that Alma is sometimes a backwards person. I remember my mother's counter-intuitive teaching, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing poorly."[4] At different times in my Treaty story, I have got the protocol backwards, the words incorrect, the delivery tentative, but this has not stopped beautiful things from happening.

As I am learning to be an ally, I often share a benediction, "Go forth and be awkward," because ally work is not begun by perfect or perfectly prepared people. I may even go so far as to say, if you are not aware of your awkwardness, what are you doing wrong? Maybe this is just my backwards self-talk as the grass pokes through the snow again this spring, and I continue walking, writing, and singing Treaty education.

NOTES

1. Morris says these words at the 1876 Treaty Six negotiations. They may or may not have been used in Treaty Four, where Chief Ben Pasqua signed; however, there is an understanding that what was said at any of the numbered Treaties applies to all numbered Treaties.
2. I first heard Beth Cuthand's poem "Four Songs for the Fifth Generation" while taking a creative writing class at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (which is now the First Nations University of Canada) with Beth Cuthand and Gail Bowen in 1988. Since then I have heard teaching around the concept of the seventh generation, and that all decisions should be mindful

of seven generations. In Treaty negotiations, they say the women reminded the negotiators to remember the children and their children's children. Also, my friend Mike Cook says that the Seventh Generation is the now-or-never generation, for language retention, especially.

3. Kētē-ayah Alma thought we should change "Living together on the land" (OTC, 2008) to "We are one with the land."
4. Mom tells me that she is quoting G. K. Chesterton. A quick internet search tells me that he is credited with saying, "Anything worth doing is worth doing badly."

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