

Comments Arising From Tanya Talaga's Massey Lecture of 24 October:

"All Our Relations: Finding Our Way Forward"

What I came out of that talk pondering was the blatant contrast between Indigenous and Canadian culture. When Tanya spoke of the man coming home to tend to the reindeer after his brothers committed suicide, it dawned on me how this man gave up his career and dream of music to continue his family's legacy and how meaningful that really is. This rarely, if at all, occurs in Canadian culture-- people do not change careers to take over a family member's job if they can no longer continue. Lastly, I am still curious about a question that came from the audience. Medical care should be available to remote Indigenous communities, but how are we able to get medical care to all of these distant places and to what extent can we?

The most memorable moment for me was the opening prayers and their meanings that were taught to us, for both the opening speaker and Bob Baker (for the eagle prayer) spoke of openness and our relationship to the creator. There is the recurring motif of using a relational outlook in having the prayer descend from the creator to the heads and feet of our bodies to the floor, and from respecting the eagles that have carried our messages and have flown closer to the creator than we have. Tanya's description of youth experiencing a loss of belonging and identity by being in a traumatizing, in-between third space resonates closely with the readings of the live/dead/legal Indian we discussed in class.

Talaga mentioned how despite all of the pain and historical trauma in these communities, there was hope in the youths in these areas. How is this taking shape? Are there calls to action being lead by the younger people, are these kids getting involved in politics, are they more equipped to deal with these pains because they have supportive elders and communities? How is this next generation bringing about 'hope'?

One of the things that struck me was Tanya's comment about being gifted a story. In Indigenous communities stories do work. This made me think about the work her story was doing last night. While the lecture series was prompted by the desire to address the high rates of suicide that is seen in the Indigenous youth population, it struck me how difficult it was for her to say the words... I wonder if the fact that the lecture felt a little disjointed was related to the grief that comes when we look straight at the issues.

Another interesting point raised was the idea that for Indigenous communities 'family' extends beyond the idea of the nuclear family. Her comment on how removal from the community for youth means more than just loss of ties with immediate family, but also multiple layers of loss that reflect the loss of

community. Author Jonathan Lear wrote a book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. In it he thinks about resilience in the face of cultural destruction. I am not entirely convinced by Lear, but I think it is interesting to think about how change happens. Sustainable change, I believe, can only come from hope. The question then becomes how do we help Indigenous youth find hope. How in the face of the vast inequalities and racism they face every day, do we work to put systems in place that offer a chance to dream, a moment of hope?

This idea of hope I think was reflected in one of the questions. The woman who had been arrested and protested, found no reason to hope. She could not see how her actions were connected to or made things better for Indigenous communities. Tanya answered her question with a challenge to include Indigenous people in her circle of protests, which I think may offer the woman some hope. In the face of cultural destruction, Indigenous communities are finding hope. It's small. It's difficult at times to hang on to. But, language renewal, court cases, and community educational/protest projects like Idle No More offer glimmers of hope. The difficulty for Canada, I think, is how to include and even allow Indigenous voices to lead on this path.

Here are some takeaways that I had yesterday from the Tanya Talaga talk: the prevalence of suicide occurring amongst Indigenous individuals was eye opening since the statistic was close to 30% higher when compared to the general population who commit suicide. Further, sexual abuse that young men had to endure left crippling post traumatic stress in which many men had contemplated taking their own lives. Question: Why has the federal government not aided Indigenous populations with resources since they are one of the most vulnerable populations?

I resonated with what Tanya said about Indigenous communities in Canada knowing what is best for themselves and what they need, and I agree with her that the government of Canada is being paternalistic when it assumes it knows those things better. Another aspect of her speech that stood out to me was the story about when Health Canada denied sending money to an Indigenous community who needed it in order to get emergency mental health workers, because a group of young people in the community had engaged in a suicide pact. I thought that was absolutely unacceptable, disgusting, and racist that Health Canada reasoned their denial by saying something along the lines of "it was an odd time in the fiscal cycle".

The questions posed by the audience at the end appeared to have a common thread in that folks were trying to wrap their heads around what they, themselves, can do to create change, as well as how to address indigenous concerns substantively in policy. What I found most interesting about Tanya's answers to these questions was that she recommended involving the community to come up with the solutions. The answer was deceptively simple, and yet integral to the long fight for indigenous rights to self-determination.

I really enjoyed the talk from Tanya Talaga, and the use of traditional song was nice to hear from an elder. Something that really resonated with me was that the province of Nunavut is the only province to have a suicide prevention program for Indigenous youth. Knowing that the suicide rate is higher in Northern and more secluded reserves, there should be more action from the provincial governments to try and fix this issue the best that they can. An idea that Tanya kept repeating was that the Indigenous people know what they need, the government just needs to listen and want to help, I think this is important with the history of Canada and the Indigenous people there is a lot of downplay on certain issues. For the government of Canada to listen to the Indigenous needs from their own people would be huge, and I think that is the next big step that can be taken that would perhaps change the relationship in a good way.

Question: After each drumming prayer, the audience and the Elder would raise their hands briefly and say (please pardon my spelling): "Haitchka OCM (or oseeyum?)" What does this action and word mean and what is significant about this ritual in their prayer?

Also, a moment that I will most remember was the story of the umbilical cord and how Indigenous people would bury it to ensure connection to the land. This resonates with me because the government has not ensured a stable connection between Indigenous peoples and **their** land (like how the government wanted to confiscate the sacred burial grounds in Oka).

Just a few things that stood out for me at the lecture:

I thought it was a little awkward during the Lieutenant Governor's speech that she referred to Indigenous people as "our." Maybe I am just a little sensitive to that but to me it reflects Canada's paternalistic view of Indigenous peoples.

I found Talaga's discussion on the social determinants of health very interesting, how the basic necessities of life are missing in many communities and how risk factors can become magnified in small, rural communities.

Some interesting quotes: (not verbatim)

- "[Canada's health system] is not broken, it does what it's designed to do which is not take care of [Indigenous] people."
 - "We have a history of looking away" C. Blackstock
 - "The onus is on the survivor to find their way back"
 - The concept of a "third space"
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I found the lecture by Tanya Talaga interesting and I appreciate how she shared stories from her culture. Particularly interesting was the part where she talked about the birth process in her culture and how the

child is appreciated and connected to the land from the moment they are born (e.g. burying the placenta and cord).

I also noticed a theme in her answers for the question portion; each response encouraged full participation of indigenous people in any topic involving them or the land. I thought it was interesting given the conversations in class regarding indigenous self-determination and how the Canadian government seems to struggle supporting such a "simple" solution.

I quite enjoyed the CBC Massey lectures event, and I was actually surprised to see a number of non-indigenous people that had attended. I find that every time I talk about the ongoing issues and struggles an indigenous person experiences, many people are not aware of it, and can't fully understand. I was happy to see there were a lot of people there that cared and wanted to make a difference and make a change within the government.

I really liked the artwork that was behind Tanya during her lecture to honor the students that had committed suicide and the fact she is taking them everywhere talking about these real-life issues that are still happening, and the government still not doing anything about it. It is so extremely upsetting and disturbing that even after the elder wrote a letter to the government letting them know about the suicide pact and asked for health counselors and it was denied due to low budgeting. I don't know how can anyone justifies someone's life over budget issues and money. Providing health care and counseling and protecting our children and people regardless of race, gender, age or whatever group anyone belongs to is a basic human need. That was the biggest part of the evening that had really upset me to know this could have been prevented, but instead of course government chooses money over protecting its citizens.

Another part that stood out to me was when Tanya was talking about her friend who was running for city council, and she was discouraging him saying, there is not a possibility, and he ends up winning and the first thing he said was in his own native language with so much pride. I think that was the happiest part of the night for me. This had a lot of messages for me and I took an important lesson from it.

I didn't understand why they had to drum in the lieutenant governor? and I didn't quite understand why she was talking about Reindeers? I was a bit lost there.

For me, one of the most memorable points Tanya Talaga made during her lecture was when she was talking about the 3 spaces; aboriginals on one side, non-aboriginals on the other, and an in-between area. The middle area is where the first two groups are trying to come together but can't, with survivors in particular being in this area. This was quite eye-opening as a divide in our society has always been prevalent, but to think of there being a sort of grey area with survivors was something that I was thinking about on my way home. It is something that needs to be worked on so that survivors can find peace and move forward in their lives, not carrying grief and hurt.

Another moment i will most remember is during the Q&A at the end when someone asked Tanya where we go from here. She responded with something along the lines of listen to the communities and the people within in them because they are the only ones who know what they need. And that hope is within the communities themselves. This made me walk out of there feeling slightly optimistic about the future.

A question that I was left with after Tanya Talaga Massey lecture is why the Canadian Government is not allocating resources or funds towards suicide prevention on First Nation reserves. On top of this why the media does not direct their attention and bring to mainstream the struggles that First Nation reserves go through.

Thank you and the Department for inviting me to Tanya Talaga's CBC Massey Lecture at York Theatre on October 24, 2018 in Vancouver. I loved the opening of the lecture by the representatives from the Squamish Nation and the energy of their Sacred Songs and Stories shared by Tsawaysia Spukwus, Elder Sequalia, a knowledge keeper who is also working at SFU's First Nations Studies, and Bob Baker from the renowned [Spakwus Slulum](#) - it was great to catch up with their initiatives in West Vancouver schools and their international travel.

But what about Thomas King's reference to "dead Indians" in his book *The Inconvenient Indian* in relation to mainstream perceptions of – and comfort with – culturally framed indigenous performers as being somehow of the past, therefore with no geopolitical and economic repercussions to the contemporary settler sense of obligations and responsibilities to Sovereign Indigenous Nations?

"Thank you," kindly bow the settlers, "for allowing us to live on the land we stole from you" ...

The high energy of the Squamish introduction reminded me of requickening ceremonies recorded in relation to early contact times that helped to rebalance negativity and re-establish positive relationships for posterity. But as Tanya started speaking, the cloud of emotional high came crashing low down, leaving me bathing in the puddle of my own tears.

Tears reminded me of transformative circles studied in our class, where offender's tears can have the power to touch the victim's heart and thereby mend the relationship. Reconciliation tears may be a good start, but Talaga says that achieving equity (between the mainstream and the First Nations, Inuit and Metis) and the Indigenous Sovereignty would be more concrete steps to reconciliation.

I found that terms equity and reconciliation Talaga used frequently belong to a popular mainstream discourse that helps colonial Canada entrench its [supremacy](#).

The term “equity” reminds me of the White Paper’s legislating the white-out of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (their original national identities) to make them equal with the settler society, their colonizer. Did not Harold Cardinal (Cree) write *The Unjust Society* to shed light on the devastatingly genocidal consequences the equity/equality discourse of the White Paper would have on Indigenous Peoples as Original Sovereigns of this Land?

“Reconciliation” reminds me of the belief that Sovereign Indigenous Nations vanished, that they are museum specimens of the past, and that the wrong done against them was in the past which amnesiac Canadians are free not to remember anyways. The reconciliatory apology cements the past, giving Canadians a clean start in furthering the occupation of Indigenous Lands.

The [governor general](#), her security guard, her long ... long speech at the beginning of the event, and standing up for her, at the command, as she exited the theatre, with Talaga’s facial expression of fright in the background, foregrounded the contours of the colonial event.

It seems that the event allowed for equal performative turn-taking, but that this type of equality for Indigenous side was overshadowed when the colonial representative took the same turn. I believe that we need Indigenous Sovereignty to shape Indigenous events so that that being frightened of the heavy genocidal load the Crown representatives drag with them does not become part of the event.

CBC Massey Lectures seems to have difficulty including indigenous presenters in their high profile national events, Talaga being only the second ever since the 1960s. In fact, I believe that Talaga had to sacrifice herself to fit her presentation within the oppressive power structure of the event. There are many indigenous philosophers– quite a number – that CBC Massey Lectures missed. I wonder why. I wonder if the Indigenous intellectuals refused to participate.
