

The Long Road to Listuguj:

Witnessing York University's First PhD defense in Mi'gmaq Territory

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Entering the Listuguj Community Centre on October 12, 2010, Columbus Day, we could already see that the space had been prepared for an historic gathering, one many days, months, years, perhaps even centuries in the making. The large centre, which also serves as a Bingo Hall, was divided into two: one half of it set up in concentric circles and seating for 100, the other half with 20 round tables ready for a feast. The core circle was composed of seven tables, each seating three: Fred Gopit Metallic, Mi'gmaq historian and York PhD candidate, was flanked by two of his elders, Eleanor Johnson, from Cape Breton University and Louis Jerome from Gesgapeiag, Quebec, who officiated over the sweetgrass smudging to prepare the space and our minds, leaving the smoking shell to rest on a 4-coloured star in the centre of the circle. The seven tables represented the seven districts of the Mi'gmaq territory, and the grand captain and other chiefs had traveled from neighbouring districts (Cape Breton, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia) for this historic moment: the defense of the first PhD from the territory, and the first PhD defense to be conducted primarily in Mi'gmaq with the captains, chiefs, elders, and 100 community members as the witnesses and evaluators.

Other members of the examining committee were also seated in the inner circle: Stephen Augustine, the external examiner, a Mi'gmaq and curator at the Museum of Civilization; Kathrine Sorbey, elder from Listuguj; Kiera Ladner, a Cree scholar and constitutional expert from University of Manitoba, Leanne Simpson, Anishnabe scholar from Trent University; Ian Martin, York Internal Examiner and language expert; Ravi de Costa, Dean's Rep and FES professor of Indigenous Peoples and Globalization; Anders Sandberg, dissertation supervisor from FES; and myself, FES professor of education and the arts.

Besides the 14-hour road trip from Toronto to the Gaspé peninsula, we had each traveled our own journeys to this place and to being open to this moment. Anders spoke of how through years of dialogue with Fred, he had become convinced not only of the validity but of the integrity of the oral tradition and Fred's working in his own language for his people. It was he and FES Dean Barbara Rahder who first put forward the policy change allowing Aboriginal students to do their final graduate work in their own language; after being approved by our Faculty Council four years ago, it was eventually approved as a university policy.

It was significant that this was taking place on Columbus Day and that we were welcomed warmly to the territory, but on their own terms. The day's schedule had been carefully constructed to respect and combine both York University protocol governing doctoral defenses and Mi'gmaq protocol. So we began with a prayer and smudge, with welcoming remarks from a woman elder and the Grand Keptin of the territory, and with the "History Song" which embodied in content and form

one of the conclusions of the thesis, that songs were key carriers of the language, history, epistemology, and vision.

“We make the road by walking,” wrote Spanish poet Antonio Machado, and we were also creating this new path that honoured two very different protocols by moving through it with humility and respect. During the meeting of the committee that we had prior to the opening, we were already learning from the perspective of the elders and the external examiner, Stephen Augustine, also a Mi’gmaq, of the importance of this work to the survival of the language, to the recovery of the history of the territory, to the revaluing of the elders and their life stories, to the modeling for young people how they might carry on the language and the ways of knowing and being imbedded in it. We proposed that the defense be framed more as a dialogue, that honoured two distinct protocols but also that considered seriously the community response to the work. Is it a matter of ‘dual accountability’ – community accountability as well as accountability to the institution? What does that mean? At the end of it all, I was left wishing that more students, no matter their origins, were so grounded in their community and accountable to it (whether a community of cultural identity, of geography, or of particular interest).

As we proceeded through the dissertation, Fred offered syntheses of each chapter in Mi’gmaq and Stephen Augustine provided a synthesis in English, followed by comments and questions from the whole community.

The accountability to the community was extraordinary: the whole process represented not only returning the research to the community, an educational moment for all ages, but an honouring of the knowledge and wisdom of the knowledge keepers, the elders, and of the process of talking that Fred modeled by spending the last few years traveling around the territory to talk with elders and others about the history. Elders spoke about how Fred had visited them, taking the time to get to know them over time, to develop trust, and let their life stories unfold. Their testimonies of the value of this process confirmed the import of his work in oral tradition, as well as the chiefs’ acknowledging the level of language fluency that Fred had achieved; the fact that he is the youngest fluent speaker remains an enormous challenge for teachers of both the formal and nonformal Mi’gmaq classes and a model and inspiration for young people. We could sense the critical nature of this moment and this challenge: how will the language be kept alive? And this was not only the process but the content of Fred’s thesis: that the language carries the ways of knowing, understanding, and relating to the land, to the ancestors, to the elements, and to all living creatures including humans. The final chapter reflected on Fred’s experiences of salmon fishing with his father every year for four months, and what the salmon teaches them.

After committee members and community members responded to Fred’s presentation of chapters, a process that took five hours, the examining committee again met separately and discussed our assessment of the work, though the defense had really given us such a clear assessment. The thesis was approved

without revisions, and recommended for a dissertation prize. It could definitely serve as a model for other Aboriginal students whose doctoral work is dedicated to the future of their communities, and could also inspire other students who consider their research collaboratively defined with and accountable to their communities. Perhaps there is something very important here for the 'community-engaged' university to learn: what does this new thrust at York University mean for how we conceive of the often highly individualized processes of graduate research and thesis writing?

We returned to the dining hall, where fish soup and fresh salmon awaited us. After the feast, final ceremony was opened with a group of young boy drummers in the centre of the circle offering an honour song, followed by the announcement by Dr. Anders Sandberg, the dissertation supervisor, and Katherine Sorbey, the elder supervisor, that Fred had passed with flying colours, evoking a standing ovation from everyone in the hall. For two subsequent hours, Fred and his family officiated over a "giving back" ceremony, thanking each person who had been a part of this process, starting with his parents, wife and children, then moving one by one around the room to include everyone, from the chiefs and elders to the man who photocopied his thesis and with whom he would talk for hours about common concerns and values. The gifts were all hand-make works of Mi'gmaq art: baskets, sweetgrass rings, eagle feathers, rattles. And each person in receiving the gift, spoke about what they had learned from this process. Nothing could have better reflected the notion of 'all our relations' so central to Aboriginal thought, and epitomized a process which was deeply collaborative and communal. As guests in this community, we York faculty were humbled and honoured to witness a learning process that was so historically grounded and collectively internalized.

The road trip back to Toronto offered some time for reflection, and some of that reflection was indeed on the time that it takes to do this kind of significant relevant work, to share it, to honour it, and travel to experience it. Another sense of time, indeed, that we could all learn from.