

Canadian Philosophy Association Memorial session, “Remembering Bruce Ferguson”
 2019 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of British Columbia
 Alison Wylie | 4 June 2019

I met Bruce quite recently, in March 2018, when he and Sylvia organized a discussion circle, hosted by the Kwantlen Aboriginal Club: “Some Reflections on Indigenous Thought and Analytic Philosophy.” I regret that I didn’t get to know him well, or have a chance to work with him on the many projects he had in view for all of us. But Bruce was an enormously generous, indeed, vigorous correspondent! We had an extended email exchange after we met at Kwantlen that has had a profound effect on my thinking and I hope, going forward, on my practice as a teacher and researcher – as a settler Canadian now located here at UBC, in Musqueam territory.

I cannot do justice to Bruce as an intellectual and as a person, but what I have learned about him and from him reinforces a point that Lee Maracle and Loraine Mayer made in a CPA session on “Sovereignty and Hypocrisy Impeding Reconciliation on Campuses in Canada.” [1] They offered a sobering catalogue of the many hypocrisies that compromise aspirations to reconciliation. The only way forward, they suggested, is through sharing stories and learning from one another, cultivating the kind of listening that builds relationships and conveys the knowledge and wisdom embedded in relationships. So here is a story about the process of planning the Kwantlen discussion circle that captures at least some of the questions, challenges, and possibilities that Bruce helped us articulate and, crucially, kind of practice he embodied his own philosophical engagement.

What Bruce proposed for the Kwantlen discussion was that we explore the question of how “Indigenous thought systems” might productively “talk with mainstream Analytic traditions of Western thought and philosophy.” He took this to suggest “a direction or purpose” for what should be an open-ended, informal discussion, one aimed at “developing or finding new questions.” He emphasized that he himself was quite “comfortable being in productive fog...comfortable with disorientation,” and encouraged us to embrace this creative uncertainty ourselves. When I reread his original email, I was reminded of some salient wisdom about habits of heart and mind that Michael Marker commended to settler scholars when he gave a keynote address to an Indigenous/Science research cluster workshop in October 2018[2]: “slow down, recognize the uncertainty,” he said; “sit with that a while.” I was struck at the time by how resonant this advice is with Musqueam teachings, as recorded in the first panel of the *čəsnaʔəm* exhibit in the Musqueam Cultural Centre where we met: “Take your time and be patient in your work; there are no shortcuts. Approach your work with good thoughts and intentions – these go into all that you do.” [3]

With this in mind, Sylvia and I took up the question of whether and how the philosophical traditions in which we’d been steeped might be brought into engagement with those they have not just ignored but often rigorously excluded – the traditions in opposition to which they have defined themselves. Why should we accept that the “core” questions and assumptions now canonized in Western academic contexts capture timeless, universally gripping human concerns? Why assume that the well-rehearsed responses to them we learn in mainstream philosophy classes exemplify universal rationality as most fully realized? Bruce described the challenge that such unsettling questions often provoke: that Indigenous world views and ways of thinking are just not really capital-P Philosophy. [4] But how to respond? One could argue that Indigenous philosophical traditions are, in fact, philosophical, in terms prized by mainstream Western philosophy. They embody practices of *systematic reflection, processing of ideas*; as Bruce put it, the telling and retelling of stories is disciplined, jointly analytic and synthetic. But at the same time, these commonalities direct attention to crucial differences that, he urged, we should particularly value. For one, he noted, Indigenous world views and philosophies are typically explicitly self-situating; their sources of insight and testimony are rigorously recognized, and their content is often richly place-based. Philosophical wisdom as well as history reside in landscapes and community practices; their authority is grounded in this rootedness,

not a pretention to transcend the local, a claim of universality that should command the respect and assent of everyone. Also they often also inextricably combine the cultural and the natural; they are complexly layered, in ways that, as Michael Marker also pointed out, the partitioning of mainstream western knowledge systems ill-equips settler scholars to recognize. In this they pose a fundamental challenge the “colonial fantasy of the border”: the presumption that the spiritual and the natural can be neatly disarticulated, that rational beings should dismiss the former as irrelevant and discount the latter as merely an object of inquiry.

Sylvia and I also reflected on how debates internal to academic philosophy may be opening space to recognize the wealth of philosophical insight that is to be gained by thinking across traditions. Historians of philosophy increasingly turn their attention to the contexts in which the now-canonical traditions of Western philosophy took shape, bringing into sharp focus their contingency and drawing attention to paths not taken – in the process calling into question their claims to universality. The assurance with which analytic philosophy asserts its hegemony is also now being challenged from within; its own traditions are diverse, and they are in crisis. In my field, philosophy of science, close engagement with scientific practice reinforces the point that traditional, highly idealized norms of truth and objectivity are not only conceptually untenable, but radically misrecognize the flexible, situational, uncertain norms of practice that are the key to success in even the most seemingly rigorous and authoritative disciplines – the sciences that we take as models of epistemic authority.

These challenges, internal and external, call on us to honour a principle Sylvia identifies as central to philosophy: that “engaging meaningfully with other traditions and points of views” is the best way to come to grips with the assumptions that underpin our own thinking. This is a theme Adam Gaudry and Danielle Lorenz take up in their recent paper on “Indigenizing the Canadian Academy” (2018) when they note that it is “by excluding other epistemic traditions [that] the academy has remained focused on a rather narrow slice of human existence, represented by the Enlightenment tradition of the West” (2018: 221).[5] It is the pathologies of academic practice that have reified what should be engaged as living, dynamic, evolving traditions of inquiry and knowledge. We need to hold these practices accountable for their highly specific political framing and consequences; they are predicated on histories and assumptions we have not just lost sight of but that, all too often, we are invested in erasing and keeping well out of sight. It is our job to lift this “curtain of denial.” I take this to be one small step toward what must be more than just a rhetorical shift, a strategy for destabilizing the assumptions that underly what Gaudry and Lorenz describe as a “guest-master” relationship that compromises attempts to indigenize the academy generally, and philosophical curricula in particular.

So as Bruce would no doubt have expected, I came away from the Kwantlen discussion circle with a great many new questions and uncertainties. But what most sticks with me is his generosity, his willingness to keep talking, to explore the potential, as Gaudry and Lorenz put it, for “Indigenous and Enlightenment traditions to co-exist and productively engage one another” (2018: 225). Echoing Bruce’s approach to cultivating this exchange, they note that what matters now is “the take-up of these visions,” and in this “everyone has a role”; building a “vital future” must be a grass-roots bottom-up process (p. 226). They also raise a number of cautions along the way with which I expect Bruce would concur. The cross-fertilization of traditions must not take the form of an appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and philosophy as “source material to be analyzed” in Western terms. And, crucially, Indigenous sovereignty must be recognized in university contexts: Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders, communities of practice, must be recognized as the experts who determine what counts as Indigenous knowledge, where it will be located, and how it will be taught.

Thinking of Lee Maracle’s vision of a future in which we move beyond the current impasse created by multiple layers of hypocrisy, it is crucial that we cultivate a global sense of richly diverse humanity. This means working on many different fronts, enacting Bruce’s principles: open door, everyone speaks.

[1] Lee Maracle and Loraine Mayer, "Sovereignty and Hypocrisy Impeding Reconciliation on Campuses in Canada," Circles of Conversation session hosted by the Canadian Philosophical Association and the Canadian Sociological Association, 2019 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences (June 2, 2019).

<https://www.congress2019.ca/calendar/1440>

[2] Michael Marker, "A Beginner's Thoughts on Place-ness and Indigenous Science," Indigenous/Science Research Cluster workshop, *Building Effective and Equitable Partnerships*, Musqueam Cultural Education Resource Centre (October 10-12, 2019).

<https://indigenousscience.ubc.ca/events/workshops>
www.indigenousscience.ubc.ca

[3] ḥəsnaʔəm, *The City Before the City*, Musqueam Cultural Centre Gallery.

<https://www.musqueam.bc.ca/our-story/public-education-outreach/musqueam-gallery/>

[4] I am reminded of Kristie Dotson's essay, "How is This Paper Philosophy?," *Comparative Philosophy* 3.4 (2012): 3-29.

[5] Adam Gaudry and Danielle Lorenz, "Indigenization as Inclusion, Reconciliation, and Decolonization: Navigating the Different Visions for Indigenizing the Canadian Academy," *AlterNative* 14.3 (2018): 218-227.