



# Replacing Exclusive Sovereignty with a Relational Sovereignty

*Notes from the field*

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## *Abstract*

The following is a presentation delivered as introductory remarks for my PhD defense of the dissertation, "Weaving our authority together: transforming the prairie Indigenous political order" held in February 2020. The remarks presented a rare opportunity to strike a tone that needed to speak to my dissertation committee, six family members and four community members from Maskwacîs. These community members travelled on behalf of the Board of Maskwacîs Education Schools Commission, my research partner, and the Ermineskin Education Trust Fund, that administered the funding for almost the entirety of my post-secondary education and helped me to access my treaty right to education. My main motivation was to draw a clear picture of how exclusive sovereignty is a legacy of settler colonization that has impacted Maskwacîs and how we confronted that legacy through the articulation and implementation of a relational sovereignty.

Keywords: Indigenous governance, First Nation service delivery, relational sovereignty

I want to play these videos that were produced as Maskwacîs Education Schools Commission explored the potential of creating a unified school system in Maskwacîs (Maskwacîs Education 2017-2018). I am a member of Ermineskin Cree Nation but also identify equally with Maskwacîs, home to four First Nations, Montana, Louis Bull, Samson and Ermineskin. Many people in the audience today have travelled to be here at the defense of my dissertation.<sup>1</sup> I play these videos to illustrate what is at stake in regard to the work we conducted during the commission. For one, the education of the majority of children in the community, approximately 2300 students this year attending 11 schools. Also prominent in the videos are the people who have been capable of carrying out the steps necessary to continue improving education in the community.

The work of the commission resulted in the creation of amalgamated Education authority in Sept 2018. This occurred in a context where it is notoriously difficult for First Nations to create organizations where they share authority with each other over the provision of services. What explains the success of the commission and education in Maskwacîs generally? The work of Marshall Ganz and his formulation of strategic capacity is best suited to explain this success. His central analogy to explain strategic capacity is David vs. Goliath. What allows a group to succeed in the face of overwhelming odds (Ganz, 2009, p. 11)? The answer is strategy, or as Ganz formulates it, a 'stream of effective strategy' (Ganz, 2009, p. 8). David in this story is the group of educational leaders in Maskwacîs who led decades long struggle to slowly and gradually improve education and secondly the team that was assembled to run the commission.<sup>2</sup>

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So, David is educators in the community—who is Goliath? It would be easy to imagine that Goliath is the Federal Government, but that story wouldn't properly explain this David vs. Goliath story. While the Federal government has been almost entirely unhelpful in this story, building education in Maskwacîs is not a story of going toe-to-toe with the Federal government. For the most part, Educational leaders in the community choose to ignore the Federal government and devote their energies towards waging an often unrecognized and thankless struggle inside the schools. The story I commonly tell revolves around an old strategy pursued by Miyo Wahkohtowin—the Ermineskin schools. Since funding is tied to enrollment, First Nations often pursue a strategy where they seek to recruit on-reserve residents who are attending provincial schools. Miyo wahkohtowin, by contrast, did not strategize about how to recruit students from provincial schools. The thinking was: their job was to focus on the children in their schools, not those attending other schools. Over time by focusing on the children attending their school and their innovative use of available resources, the quality of education they were able to deliver continued to increase and they became a school of first choice for many students in the area, eventually drawing students who lived off-reserve. When Miyo had its last year of operation in 2017-2018, their schools had been at or near their enrollment capacity for 10 years. While in an institutional context, I view this move in line with Glen Coulthard's call to 'turn away' from state recognition (2007).

So, if the Canadian Government is not Goliath who is? It is certainly not ourselves against ourselves, nor would the analogy work. The schools recruit and retain some of the strongest and most capable employees in the community, both those who are from Maskwacîs and those from elsewhere. Here, Goliath is the structure of settler colonization, its effects and the context it creates. The story of education in Maskwacîs is remarkable because within the context of settler colonization all of the odds were stacked against us to be successful both in the longer history of improvement but also in running a commission that could result in creating a shared education authority.

My original research question was: what is the impact of settler colonization on Indigenous political orders? But increasingly throughout the research the way I began to see my second research question as more important—what traditions

can prairie Indigenous peoples draw on to respond to settler colonialization?

The primary impact of settler colonialization has had on Indigenous political orders has been the rise of what I call an *exclusive sovereignty* (Wildcat 2020). When I speak of settler colonialization as Goliath, I do not just mean the lack of funding, the dictates of the Indian Act or the rigidity of contribution agreements. I also mean working in the political context where an exclusive version of sovereignty has come to shape in profound ways how First Nations are situated in relation to each other. Goliath is all of the forces that keep us separated and stall a flourishing of shared forms of authority and citizenship. In contrast to an exclusive sovereignty, I argue we must move towards a relational sovereignty that begins to breakdown these barriers and that we can do so through leading a *wahkohtowin* movement, which I will describe shortly.

Prior to settler colonialization, the prairie Indigenous political order was regionally interconnected but groups themselves were decentralized, by which I mean there was no chief who ruled everything. There were different authorities who led in different areas, such as medicine or ceremony, a war chief could take over from the leading Chief in times of trouble, but none of them had supremacy over the other. Hence there was no centralized authority (Innes, 2012; Boahaker, 2006; Binnema, 2001; Smallface-Marule, 1984). This did not mean people had no ability to influence or persuade each other, they did. During the gathering at Sounding Lake in 1878 Plains Cree Chief Big Bear had not yet signed treaty six and was holding out hope there was room to negotiate. At the treaty gathering, other Chiefs, not wanting to diminish Big Bear's negotiating strength, agreed to not take treaty until after Big Bear had finished negotiating with officials of the Crown (Dempsey, 1984). The reason was if they took treaty while Big Bear was negotiating, people in Big Bear's band would be tempted to leave his band and join another band so they could receive the treaty allowance.

I explore two main impacts Settler colonialization has on Indigenous political authority on the prairies. First, which is well known, is the replacement of traditional forms of governance with Band Councils governed by the Indian Act. I describe this change as the movement from decentralized authority and its replacement with centralized authority, because we now have an elected

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chief who is the head of the government. The second move is the way different sites of authority are situated in relation to each other. That is, First Nations exercise their authority in isolation from each other. Thus, we should understand settler colonization as not only resulting in the move from decentralized to centralized forms of political authority, but also the movement from a regionally interconnected political order to one that upholds the independent and exclusive authority of First Nation governments (See Wildcat, 2020, pg. 82). These forms of authority combine citizenship regime where we First nations have bounded membership lists and membership rules that have great difficulty responding to the ways people belong to different communities and move around. Together our bounded forms of political authority and citizenship are the pillars of exclusive sovereignty. And it was this exclusive sovereignty produced through the ongoing history of colonization that was our Goliath.

How did we defeat it? Many factors had to be in place, such as decades long record of improvement in education in Maskwacis, a more recent history of collaboration between the Four education systems and the ability to act quickly enough that the crown dealt with us before it implemented a standardized funding process. But what was needed during the work of the commission was a leadership team that was able to create a vision that a large majority of the community collectively came to believe in. I believe there were three parts—focusing on what's doing what's right for children became a central point of discussion and reference throughout the process but especially so for the political leadership of the community. A focus on children reduced and mitigated the prominence of jurisdiction and prevented the commission from being consumed by questions of who would get to control what.

Second, we are able to create a vision of unity in a community and create a belief that we were capable of getting along well together. In our community presentation, the last three slides went as follows. First, 'We become the stories we tell about ourselves'. Next, we acknowledged the general belief that we were incapable of getting along but provided counter examples of places where cooperation did exist. We closed with a slide 'We believe the work of MESC is a chance to tell a story of unity' and invited people to share in this vision. The result was an incredible 92% of people over 1300 surveys responding yes to the question 'do you support the proposed amalgamation?'

(MESC, 2018, p. 14).

Finally, the commission was guided by and influenced by the Cree concept of *wahkohtowin* (MESC 2017)—which translates directly as kinship but is a bigger concept that I think has three components to it. The first component is the actual act of being in relation with other humans and also the natural world. Second, *wahkohtowin* emerges from a worldview where you see all of existence as being animate because all of existence is animate then it means you are related to other aspects of existence. Finally, it is not just that we are in relationships with others, but that there are proper and good ways to conduct those relationships, hence *wahkohtowin* has a legal component that asks us to maintain good relationships (MESC, 2018, pp. 18-21, 24; Cardinal and Hildebrant, 2000; Campbell, 2007; McAdam, 2015; Macdougall, 2010; Wildcat, 2018).

The focus on *wahkohtowin* was important because the other way to understand the proposal to create a shared school system was through the concept of treaty. Here, there is a belief that by entering into an agreement with the federal government that we would lose our treaty right to education. The sacredness of treaty is a very important political tradition but so is *wahkohtowin*. If we had relied solely on understanding the process by focusing on the Treaty right to education, the commission would have resulted in the Four Nations maintaining separate systems—the thinking being that Chief and Councils must have direct control over the schools in order to protect the treaty right to education. Rather, we had another tradition that opened up a different way of thinking about the issue at hand. *Wahkohtowin* asked us to consider what it meant to be related to each other and what those relationships meant for the delivery of education. Notably, some of the schools had much better success than others and the children who attended the least successful schools often did so because their parents did not have the resources to ensure their children went to another school either on-reserve or in a nearby provincial school system.

Together, a focus on children, a vision of unity and grounding the process in *wahkohtowin* became David's sling shot in the face of the goliath of exclusive sovereignty. Through MESC is exceptional because it was able to envision and enact relational sovereignty over the delivery of education Maskwacîs. But

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here, I hold out hope that MESC is just a small taste of what is to come. Relational sovereignty will ask us to examine the ways different sites of political authority relate to each other and ask us to move away from attempting to think about governance challenges how we internally reform a single First Nation. Rather we must consider how Nations might transform their relationships with each other (See Wildcat 2020, pp. 166-208).

It will also ask us very serious and hard questions about our citizenship orders. Where I first came to understand this in a profound sense was while working as the registrar of Maskwacis Cultural College—my position required me to communicate with various funding agencies to help secure funding for students. When students did not have a singular, uncontested Band affiliation and did not live on the reserve where they held membership the difficulty of accessing funding was significantly increased. Working with applicants and various service providers to sort through these obstacles is where I first began to fully understand how our citizenship regime does not map well onto the lives of many First Nations people.

Audra Simpson illustrates what is at stake through her concept of feeling citizenship: ‘What I wish to suggest is that these *living, primary, feeling citizenships* may not be institutionally recognized, but are socially and politically recognized in the everyday life of the community’ (2014, p. 175). There exists a sizable gap between our actual practices of being in relationship with each other—what I call relational citizenship—and the rules we have to regulate our memberships—what I call formal citizenship. And this gap has real consequences in individuals’ lives.

At some level I think what we need is an important conversation that focuses on this gap and I think we need to push a larger conversation that focuses on how our formal citizenship can become more accountable to our practices of relational citizenship. A major part of this will be confronting the ways our citizenship regimes impact women and children. Creating this accountability in our formal membership rules will require drastic changes. It is an issue that cannot be solved by changing the membership rules of a single nation. At some level, it will require creating a citizenship regime at a level that operates between First Nations.

Thus far the challenge of building a relational sovereignty within our political orders to replace an exclusive sovereignty seems immense—transformation will have to occur not only in the ways First Nations have to relate to each other but will also ask us to dramatically rework our formal citizenship. Is this even possible? I think it is, what's required is a *wahkohtowin* movement, a movement that I believe is already underway at its earliest stages. MESC is commonly described as a *wahkohtowin* movement itself, but also there has been a flourishing of attention by people in various fields in the use of *wahkohtowin* to ground their organizations and their study of institutions—including law and governance, classrooms, child welfare, community-academic relationships, Gladue reports and more (Desmarais, 2017; Friedland, 2016; Buhler et al., 2014; O'Reilly et al., 2004; Smith 2019; Flaminio, 2013). Given the flourishing of activity, I actively avoid prescribing what I think relational sovereignty will look like, outside of describing tangible examples. Rather, my contribution to a *wahkohtowin* movement is to think about building out a political infrastructure that can support all of these movements. The political infrastructure will help to amplify existing sensibilities around relational sovereignty that already exist. Because what is required is not a revolution but a series of successful campaigns that can move us towards relational sovereignty.

Part of the work a *wahkohtowin* movement will have to undertake is creating the institutional capabilities to address and respond to concerns of gender injustice and its various intersections. Right now, we require leadership teams who can translate ideas into the political action necessary to reconfigure social and political life. Ideas, regardless of how compelling they are, only create change when people in existing relationship are willing to act on those ideas in concert with each other (Ganz, 2009). In other words, a *wahkohtowin* movement cannot be simply an intellectual endeavor, we need to develop the infrastructure and capacity and undertake the campaigns necessary to reconfigure our formal citizenship, systems of political authority and institutions toward a relational politics.

To this end, I offer a sketch of a method I am calling relational governance. While I am highly motivated by furthering relational sovereignty, the research project I am launching is primarily concerned with a relational governance. Recent work on the concept of Indigenous data sovereignty highlights the

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relationship between sovereignty and governance. Work from the Native Nations Institute argues: 'Indigenous data sovereignty is the right of a nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data' (Carroll et al. 2019), whereas 'Indigenous nation data governance represents the comprehensive process by which tribes address the collection, ownership, control and application of their data' (Raine et al., 2017, p. 6). That is, sovereignty outlines who has authority and where, but governance entails how you apply that authority and realize it 'on the ground'. I think we can draw the same connection between Indigenous sovereignty and governance more broadly. Indigenous sovereignty describes and identifies the sources and foundations of Indigenous peoples' political authority. Indigenous governance and policy are the tools and vehicles we require to exercise our sovereignties.

Relational governance research projects will seek to gather information on where First Nations have created shared jurisdictions to deliver governmental services, the wahkohtowin movement, the policy of Indigenous led institutions and relational citizenship. But in addition to these research tasks, the Relational governance is equally concerned with building methods that can be taken up by Indigenous communities to think about how we transform configurations of governance with each other. Specifically, the relational government method asks groups who are open to creating a new arrangement of governance with each other 'how do we locate responsibility within a relational web based on Indigenous law'? I believe it's possible for groups to work through this question in three parts:

1. Locating responsibility—rather than locate authority we need to locate responsibility. Locating responsibility does involve identifying where decisions are made but it involves clearly identifying how that responsibility is set within a broader matrix of relationships and reciprocal obligations.
2. Relational web—who is included in having a say in how decisions are made? For those who are included, how do we map out and account for the different relationships and forms of association that exist? What are the kinds of formal citizenship and relational citizenship that occur in this space?
3. Indigenous law—finally, what values, philosophies and ultimately laws are we drawing on to make decisions? This work is difficult because it not only

involves identifying shared values and commonalities but working through conflicts that might arise when our intellectual interpretations would respond to a situation differently. Identifying laws and principles will also help us to frame the governance challenges we are facing.

A relational governance method should provide a template for using our intellectual traditions to address pressing governance challenges facing Indigenous nations. Relational governance is ultimately meant to help people identify forms of political authority, citizenship and law that work towards building Indigenous institutions and create methods that help people conduct the public dialogue necessary to work through these decisions collectively. While I believe building forms of relational sovereignty is important for Indigenous political systems, if we want to move in that direction, we first need to create the vehicles that will help us travel down that road.

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### *Notes*

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<sup>2</sup> Notable from Maskwacîs leading the effort include people include Brian Wildcat, Kevin Wells, Elder John Nepoose, Jen Napoos, Tom Crier, Councillor Mario Swampy, Ermineskin Councilor Nina Mackinaw, Chief Daryl Strongman, Chief Brad Rabbit, Chief Irvin Bull and MESC Board member Tamara Wildcat.