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“O Kanatha! We Stand on Guard for Thee!
Indigenous, National and Transnational Identities in the Americas”

I owe some of the inspiration for the first part of the title of my presentation today to a Mi’kmaq brother, a wonderfully talented singer and song writer who has won international recognition for his work. His name is Willie Dunn and his music has been produced in Canada and in Germany. As a young artist, in 1969, he recorded his own version of Canada’s national anthem, “O! Canada”. Here is Willie Dunn's version:

(The background music is a lone guitar discreetly playing the British national anthem, “God Save the Queen”).

O! Canada, our Home and Native Land,
One hundred thousand years, we’ve walked upon Your sands.
With saddened hearts, we’ve seen You robbed and stripped
Of everything You prized.
While they cut down the trees, we were shunted aside
To the jails and the penitentiaries.
O! Canada, once glorious and free,
O! Canada, we sympathize with Thee,
O! Canada, we stand on guard for Thee.
(The guitar finishes with the first six notes of the USA’s national anthem).

A few months ago, I wrote a short poem in prose in honour of my late father. I titled that poem, to which I will come back a little further in my talk, “Matriotism”. I believe it contains the whole essence of the meaning of our Indigenous resistance to the ever-intense pressure that settler nation-states apply on us to force us to assimilate to their respective body politic. Here is my little ode to my father:

Matriotism

“I was nine years old and in fifth grade in the primary school situated in the little Québécois town just next to our Indian Reserve. A tall, handsome man, standing straight as a spruce tree, attended with the other parents the monthly handing in of our school marks. He was the first Amerindian man ever hired in the Quebec provincial police, and probably in the whole country. He had come dressed in his police uniform. After the ceremony, he went to converse with the School Director. That time was the last that we, children of the Reserve, had to rise and sing “O! Canada”, the national anthem, a hymn in praise of our people’s dispossession and consequent
social misery. That man, it was you, Dad, who had so much love for our Mother Earth and taught us to respect and revere Her. Attouget Aystan! Thank you, my Father!”

I am presently preparing a collection of my own poems for publication. It will contain about one hundred poems, several of which express the idea of the all-importance of Nature for us, Indigenous people. Many of those poems speak to why we not only do not wish to assimilate to settler nation-states that have been forcefully created in our territories but rather, that we have the responsibility to indigenize, or americize the ones who immigrate to our continent because without a strong connection to the Earth Mother, human beings are a hazard to Her and to all the peoples, human and non-human, that compose Her.

I have thought to intersperse about half a dozen of these poems throughout my presentation today and thus make you, dear friends, the first to publicly hear some of them. This second poem, then, is to honour a friend of our Wendat and Amerindian people, who died early in the 18th century, the Baron de Lahontan. At that early hour in the history of our relations with the Europeans, Lahontan intimated to his colonial contemporaries that it was they who needed to become Indians, and not the opposite. Among my people, he is famous for his entreaty to his French congener’s:” Fais-toi Huron” (“Become a Huron”).

Become a Huron

I, to become You!
To lose my soul!
To cease to feel?
My heart,
Warm abode
Of my love
For Life,
Home of my own of yesterday,
Of today and of forever,
My heart to become
A mute bird
In the cold cage
Of my bones of metal?
I, to become You?
I, to be nothing?
That must not be!
You:
Become a Huron!

Some of my people’s history

My presentation to you today, dear friends, will be an exploration into the reasons why Indigenous people, generally, identify first with their own nation and only secondarily and sometimes, not at all, with the nation-states that have come to enclose them and pretend to include them in their citizenry. Since I will base this reflexion on my own experience as a Wendat, I will now tell you, in brief, about what our colonial existence has been and also, about how my own family has evolved as a consequence of that colonial experience. My ultimate aim is to illustrate for you how the
concept of “matriotism” can serve to clarify why most Indigenous people do not share the emotional ties to nation-states which most descendants of settlers in America and in other colonized parts of the world have in relation to those same nation-states.

Based on the poem I wrote in honour of my father, we will also see why and how Indigenous people have a very different view of the history and of the human geography of their territories and of their continent and how this view conditions their entire worldview and thus, how they conceive of their place and role in their American universe and in the world at large with respect to all the other inhabitants (human and non-human, material and immaterial) which make up the great, sacred Circle of Life.

I was born in 1948 to two Huron-Wendat parents in an Indian Reserve then called Village-des-Hurons, now renamed Wendake, the original name of the small, but strategically located country that once existed at a few hours’ distance north of present-day Toronto and which the French named Huronia. Our Reserve is situated about fifteen kilometres north of the city of Québec. At the present-day site of that city existed an Amerindian town named Stadacona. That was the town which the original inhabitants described to explorer Jacques Cartier as their “Kanatha”, that is, their principal town. Cartier took this information as meaning that he was then “discovering” a whole country named “Canada”. The name was eventually applied to a nascent Euroamerican country: Canada. For us, descendants of the original people of that region, the name “Kanatha” has kept a very important moral and symbolic significance.

My people are the descendants of the Wendat; the name “Huron”, which means uncouth, or ill-mannered, was disparagingly put on us by the French and has served to justify the negation of our dignity as a people and simultaneously, the taking of our land and other property. At the time of the arrival of the Europeans, our Wendat people were one of North America’s most important Aboriginal Confederacies. Similarly to the Iroquois Confederacy, ours was made up of five nations. We were at the center of quite extensive trading networks and a great number of other nations in
North eastern North America utilized our language for trade and diplomacy. The Wendat Confederacy was very powerful and remarkably prosperous. The Wendat were at the heart of the Aboriginal geopolitics of the vast, beautiful region which eventually gave Canada its spirit, its name, as we have seen, and its incomparable strength as a new country.

From a population of more than thirty thousand at the time of European arrival, only a few thousand survived the shock of very severe epidemics and a period of intense warfare, often instigated through the meddling of Catholic missionaries. Of these few thousand, about four hundred made their way to the vicinity of Quebec City, where some of their ancestral populations had once lived until they were dispersed from those parts following the voyages of Jacques Cartier, the so-called discoverer of Canada and of many other French adventurers and seekers of the fabled road to the Indies. There, near present-day Quebec City, New France’s authorities created a “Reserve for the settlement and conversion of the Savages”.

From an original location on the Île d’Orléans, within sight of Québec’s promontory of Cap-aux-Diamants, we were displaced six more times, mostly because French settlers wanted the fields which we cleared for our subsistence, until we were pushed up the foothills of the (now-called) Laurentian mountains where we have been, in our small Reserve, up to this day.

I will now recite to you a poem, already published in an international anthology of Native American poetry, stating how our people, the Wendat, were originally seen by the French and how we continue to perceive ourselves, in spite of sometimes being counted as extinct:

We are the Wendat

“The Hurons are the aristocracy”,

The French said.
We had built
And we maintained
The heart-country,
Wendake.
We were the leaders,
We were the last
Among the Nations,
We were:
The Sastaretsi:
“Those who extend the House”.
We were the Wendat,
We are the Wendat.

*Matriotism*

In order to explain my ode to my father and what I mean by the word “matriotism”, I need to give you this background on our ancestors’ history and on how this poem speaks to my own family’s history. Because of our harsh experience with colonialism, our nation, like all Indigenous nations, is in general terms, made up of two types of people and families: those who are keenly interested in history and ancestral values and others who are not strongly interested in these aspects of identity. The first are often called traditionalist and the second, progressive.

Both my parents came from traditionalist families. Our way of thinking and living was characterized by a very close connection to Nature and a very high respect for our Wendat ancestors. In our family ran the knowledge about plants and traditional, or Earth medicine. Our home life was also
marked by a strong interest in our History and, specifically, by a pervasive, shared desire to “rewrite” our History. For the most part, our friends and relatives were simple folks possessing little formal education but imbued with a vivid consciousness that our Wendat people, and our Indian people, globally, had been and continued to be the victims of a false, forged non-Indigenous historiography told and written about us, a historiography which, taught and repeated in schools and in the public media over many generations had rendered most of the Canadian citizenry unable to look at us as people as worthy of respect as all other people and therefore, as entitled as all other people to live freely, happily and healthy in an inclusive, evolved society.

As is quite often the lot of traditionalist Indigenous people, we, a proud traditional Wendat family, suffered sharply and directly the effects of the cruel, racist legacy which Canadian historiography about Amerindians dealt to all Canadian citizens in all Canadian schools. Yes, as a consequence of that kind of national “education about Indians”, we, as a family, were marginalized, poor, afflicted by alcoholism, dysfunctional, but all in all, proud and thankful to the Great Spirit of Life that we were Wendat and Indian.

Here is a poem which I have dedicated to a great Cree artist from Piapot Reserve, Saskatchewan, my friend and the friend of very many of us around the world, Buffy Sainte-Marie:

America, my Home

I do not change
I have never changed
I will never change
I am America
I am the ecstasy before Creation
America that they hurt
America that they soil
America, my mother
America, for ever.

The notion of patriotism is foreign and disturbing to the Amerindian mind as it challenges the ancestral Indigenous moral precept that what many non Aboriginal people call “their home and native land” is our Mother, the Earth. To us, the word “land” can easily evoke the idea of commodity, that is, “some thing” that one can buy and sell (normally with a profit). In contrast, the expression “our Mother Earth” carries a soothing, peace-giving feeling of belonging to a big, powerful, universal family of which she, the Earth, is the Mother, a Being of infinite beauty, goodness and love for all Her children, human and non human.

Whenever we, traditional Amerindians, hear the word “land” used to refer to our Mother Earth, we become worried and defensive. Because we live with this constant feeling that we have to defend our Mother Earth against governments and states which have by force appropriated Her and are treating Her as their material possession, our existence as Indigenous people cannot but be a perpetual political and spiritual quest. This sense of duty permeates our hopes, our prayers and our dreams; it is something sacred which we gently lay by our side when we go to rest and caringly pick up again when we wake up. Traditional Indigenous people are forced to try and live in a spiritual manner, that is, in a few words, to constantly acknowledge and honour, in their heart and soul, the infinite web of sacred relations uniting all beings around the Great Circle of Life.

Indigenous people in the Americas and probably, the world over, strongly believe in their duty to affirm, mostly through their songs, dances and ceremonies, the universal relationship which makes all life one. In fact, this
belief is so prevalent that it is customary to hear their spiritual leaders say that the safeguard of life itself on our Planet-Earth rests with the Indigenous peoples that have preserved and maintained their sense that the Earth is a Mother to be loved and revered. “Our customs, our beliefs, says a màma (Kogi spiritual leader) of Colombia, are as a torch, as a light which illuminates the world. If that light gets extinguished, the world will darken and die. The civilized don’t know it, but if it were not for us, the world would already have ended”.

Over the past four decades, the non-Indigenous world has conceived and expressed a new respect for Indigenous people and their traditional knowledge. However, in order to truly connect spiritually, emotionally and intellectually, there needs to be more awareness, amongst the non-Indigenous world, of the deeper reasons for Indigenous resistance to nation-states’ efforts to assimilate them. Contrary to common thinking, these reasons have but little to do with the righting of past wrongs which, to be sure, have been innumerable and extremely grave and will for long continue to have painful and very adverse effects on the lives and the chances of survival of a vast majority of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. The real, deep reason for Amerindian / Indigenous stark refusal to be ideologically confounded with their non-Indigenous relatives is: their very different perception of reality.

It is in their respective perception of what is happening to our common Mother the Earth that the two worlds come apart. Concurrently, it is in our ability (or inability) to cause humanity to come together to protect Her that lies either the risk of our knowing a future of disunity and misfortune or our chance of having one of togetherness, harmony and security. On the one hand, the non-Indigenous world is made to believe, by many of its intellectual, political and spiritual leaders, that Nature, or “the environment” is, through the infinite goodness of a masculine God, a marvellously inexhaustible amount of matters which will forever and ever satisfy the needs and fulfill the desires of all of planet Earth’s human inhabitants, that is, those who have the ingeniousness to extract from it the basic materials needed to fabricate these goods which people are so often misled to think
that they need. On the other hand, traditional Indigenous people - and an ever-growing number of non Indigenous people - see, feel, hear and smell that the Earth, their Mother, is being ceaselessly, thoughtlessly abused and treated violently and with spite, cut all apart into pieces according to the fancy of powerful humans.

My father, that Spring day of 1957, acted courageously and showed his loyalty to his ancestors and to his people. My father was a true and loyal son of the Earth. In that sense, he was, to use the word of the great Goethe, ein Weltburger, who saw that mankind had to evolve out of a narrow vision of national or ethnic-based identity. Thus, my father was able to profoundly feel that “his people” included all of humanity, as well as all the other peoples of non-human beings.

My father, that day, posed a deed of matriotism: he could not simply tolerate that his own children and others mindlessly accept to register in their conscience a hymn which was meant to strip them of their pride as Indigenous children and so, of their sense of their particular responsibility in relation to the Earth and the defence which we all owe Her from the fact that we are Her children.

There was, however, a definite social risk involved in choosing the path he chose to take, especially for a man without material wealth or real social influence who, besides, had sworn allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen of England, then Canada’s Sovereign and Ultimate Ruler. Through his public deed, my father expressed his conviction that our Mother Earth, and no one else, is the One to whom we owe our first allegiance. The Queen is a human invention for human needs; the Earth is our Mother and a living gift from our Creator, or the Universal Intelligence, or “the Great Spirit”. There could be and, in fact, there was a social price to pay for publicly showing and demanding respect for beliefs so contrary and opposed to social and indeed, religious convention, especially at a time, more than fifty years ago, when virtually no one dared publicly express such difference in belief. My father, just like our Sages of old and of today, never wished to question in others a
healthy, open-minded national pride: he simply and humbly believed that the first loyalty of fellow humans should rest with our common Mother Earth.

Without any practised discourse to that effect, my father based his act (of “matriotism”) on our Wendat and Indigenous thinking that our whole ability to live in balance, as humans, depends on our being conscious that it is our Mother Earth who sustains us physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. To us, traditional Indigenous people, God, as that Being is often conceived through religions invented by humans, is so immensely great, wise and powerful that we dare not think that we can understand His / Her thinking and motives or, in fact, that such an almighty Being can be present to our daily wants and worries or, even less, need anything from us. The only thing we, humans, can do, in relation to the Great Master of Life is to humbly and wholeheartedly express our gratitude for the gifts constantly received from Her, from Him. In contrast, if we are attentive and therefore believe in our Mother the Earth, we are enabled to carry on an intense, wonderfully inspiring and intimate communication with Her at every moment of our lives.

This is the reason why we see ourselves as matricentric or gynocentric (that is, Earth-based) thinkers and that this Indigenous approach to life is reflected in our social customs and in our ways of constructing our societies, as well as in many of our Creation Stories themselves. In this reason is also found the explanation of why traditional Amerindian, and Indigenous people in all parts of the world where they still exist, vividly resist pressure to be assimilated to mainstream socio-political and religious systems, as all of them are patriarchal and patricentric/androcentric. We also call this way of thinking and of living the way of the Circle, that is to say, as we have already hinted, the traditional Indigenous practice of recognizing and honouring the universal web of relationships which unites all beings of all natures, or the Great, Sacred Circle of Life. My father was a true humanist, a spirit-warrior, as Indigenous people so respectfully say. My father had deep love for the Earth. My father was a matriot.
I now wish to read to you another poem I wrote some years ago about the way leaders are chosen and elected in so-called modern democracies. We, Amerindians, who have given the world real models for democracy, still possess many ideas as to how to create true, inclusive (circular) democracy.

Elections

The Canadians have won again
They’re gonna be liberal
They’re gonna be conservative
They’re gonna reform
They’re gonna democratize
They’re gonna be sovereign
They’re gonna be independant
They’re gonna develop Canada,
They’re gonna transform her into money, jobs.
Canada is still rich, very rich, they say.
One day, she will be poor, dirtied up,
Exhausted, sick, unhappy.
The Canadians will no longer be able to win, nor
Be liberal, or conservative, or democratize, or
Reform, or be sovereign, or independent.
Will there then remain someone enamoured
Of the wonderful Motherland
Strangers once named Canada?

*There is only one race: the race against time*

In countless Native communities in North, Central and South America, Indigenous people use the symbolism of the Circle to teach and to explain their ways of knowing and of living. Very frequently, in many parts of the entire continent, the Circle is divided into four quarters, representing the four sacred directions, the four main elements in nature, the four dimensions of the human, namely, the physical, the emotional, the mental and the spiritual, as well as many other realities as perceived according to a general, continental Amerindian cosmovision. Interestingly for our present reflexion, Indigenous people of the Americas also see four families of peoples, each with its own special gift to be shared with the three others, and the four make up one universal human family. Elders tell us that the continent of America, where Amerindians have a position and a role of teachers in relation to their newly arrived relatives, is the continent where humanity is in the slow process of learning that all life, human and otherwise, is one. Our Sages tell us that the time when we are to come together as a family has arrived. We no longer have, they say, the time to linger on our differences or even on the wrongs that have been inflicted upon us, Indigenous peoples, in the past and that we are still suffering in this supposed post-colonial period of our history. We have to concentrate on how we can use our particular gifts and vision to mend and better the world for everyone. We could invent and use an aphorism such as “There is only one race: the race against time”.

Daily, our Elders say to us that our Mother Earth is suffering. We all know already that the Earth is undergoing an increasingly rapid process of destruction through the actions of linear-thinking humans. Here, however, I am speaking of wise, old human beings, in this context, Indigenous of many nations, who sometimes come to our classes and attend our University events and tell us with genuine emotion that they feel the pain of our Mother
Earth and of the animal peoples, the bird peoples, fish peoples, plant peoples and others. We then receive a very rare and important kind of education, the education of the heart, one that is largely absent in the so-called normal, mainstream system. We hear the voice of the Earth and we know, with mind and heart, that it is She speaking because She says the same things through the voices of everyone of these men and women.

Whether they be Algonquin, Ojibway, Mohawk, Innu, Inuit, Métis, Wyandot, Cree, Mi’kmaq, Déné, Squamish or Siksika or whether they come from southerly climes and are Quechua, Maya, Aymara, Nahuat, Miskito, Mapuche, Kayapo, Diaguita or Kolla, our Elders speak with that one voice. Of course, I am, at this moment, thinking of our venerated Algonquin Elder William Commanda, who is 96 years old and whom some students from this great and beautiful country of Austria have also heard when he visited us in class and when our class visited him in his home community of Kitigan Zibi, about an hour and a half from Ottawa. Elder Commanda moves many to tears when he calls all of us his people, his family and using French, English and his native Algonquin, affectionately entreats us all to turn our minds and hearts towards our Mother Earth and to be Her spiritual guardians and defenders.

When referring to the real, deeper struggle of the Indigenous people, spiritual leaders use the expression “spiritual revolution”. By that, we generally understand three of our Indigenous philosophical and post-contact historical realities: first, the social misery that our peoples have endured as a result of colonial imposition by foreigners has been a very violent upsetting of the socio-political order which our ancestors had carefully and painstakingly elaborated in our continent over countless generations since time out of memory; second, the responsibility has lied with us to see that the lost balance is restored and thirdly, that in order to properly discharge this responsibility, we, Indigenous people, have to think and act in accordance with our ancestral circular tradition and look at all humans (especially the ones who have come to America from other parts of the Earth to live with us) as true relatives who can and will join hands with us in this global task, vital for the future welfare of humanity.
Our peoples keep many prophecies, all of them quite similar in their practical essence: the time of mindless assault on the Mother Earth will come to an end. Signs of the arrival of that time will be plainly visible and observable in all parts of the world. That time will be one of unification of many people of all nations in defence of their common Mother Earth and in the name of the children to be born from then up to “the seventh generation”. That time will be one in which the aboriginal peoples of the Americas will play a central role in making humanity gain a vision of how and why life itself is but one great circle of sacred relations uniting all beings.

Our Elders are equally univocal in saying to us that the world cannot begin to truly address its most critical social and environmental challenges as long as women are not allowed to return and occupy the central place where Nature has willed them to be in their respective societies and in the global community. At any rate, in spite of patriarchal, androcentric, and linear powers-that-be, we are beginning to see that this essential natural dictate is being actualized. In Canada, and in many nation-states around the world, women make up the majority of students and are beginning to occupy many positions as decision-makers in all fields of social endeavor. To our Amerindian Sages, this is a very hope-giving sign that the time of universal rebalancing which so many of our Sages have foretold (the Incas of old have called that time the Pachakuti) is really here and that therefore, important ideas that are Indigenous to the Americas are beginning to help refashion the world, as foreseen by wise ancestors of old. For instance, in classes that I and others teach in our Program of Aboriginal Studies, at the University of Ottawa, I contentedly find myself in a world drastically transformed from the one I knew as a pupil when even a pale-faced Huron kid like myself had to confront harsh, racist attitudes the moment some people knew his family name, a name generally associated with Huron and Indian traditionalism. I therefore say: matricentrism (or also gynecocentrism) will take us back to an attitude of respect and love with regard to Nature, or Mother Earth. My answer to the most pressing problems we face as humankind is: *Women of the world, get educated, and you will once again form and educate men able*
to respect you as the source of their life, and Nature Herself, as the ultimate Giver of Life!

Here is a poem I wrote, which speaks of the importance for the global community of helping preserve the Indigenous languages, therefore, the Indigenous cultures themselves:

First World

Learn as many languages as you can
To connect your heart to a common humanity.
For English, you don’t have a choice,
For French and Spanish, it is strongly advisable,
For Mandarin, it may soon be a must,
For Arabic, Hindu, Portuguese and Japanese, it would be very smart,
For German and Russian, it would show and give wisdom;
But for connecting to the beginning of time,
For learning genderlessness, racelessness, agelessness,
For thinking globally, circularly, naturally
Learn an Indigenous tongue,
Let’s all do it!

The month of the Pachamama

Before closing, I would like to present to you a short video showing glimpses of a five-week visit I made, in 2008, to various Indigenous
communities in Northern Argentina. While there, I was able to observe the stark poverty in which these peoples have to live because of a particularly harsh and violent colonial experience. However, I was also able to witness the striking fervour and devotion of these Amerindians to Mother Earth, whom they universally name «Pachamama». Thanks to an Argentinean friend I made in Ottawa, a scholar in his own right, Father Juan Domingo Griffone, I could arrange these visits to seven different communities during the month they affectionately name «el mes de la Pachamama». In most of these communities, I attended very moving ceremonies in which the Indians, Kolla, Toba, Guarani, Diaguita and others, offered their Mother Earth through her «mouth» (a hole in the ground which they reverently make and prettily adorn), the best foods, plants and beverages they have. On those occasions they speak and express their deepest gratitude to Mother Earth.

What I mostly learned during that trip is that, like the Kogi máma of Colombia, these most gentle and humble people harbour in their heart of hearts an invincible and ineradicable assuredness that their spiritual ways are absolutely necessary for the maintaining of a sacred moral order in their world and in the world itself. Conversing and listening to them, I came to understand that these Amerindians are acutely conscious of a responsibility that is their own of standing up for their ancestral principles and that they hold the absolute conviction that their culture and spirituality will eventually win the respect of the non-Indigenous world, for the benefit and certainly, for the edification of humankind itself. I now present to you this brief video.

My dear friends and relatives, I would now like to end my presentation by saying how heartily I have welcomed this invitation here and how grateful I feel to the University of Innsbruck and in a special manner, to my dear colleague and sister, Dr. Ursula Moser and to the Zentrum für Interamerikanischen Studien for the honour of making me part of this series of lectures on Indigeneity and Identity in the Americas. Personally, I feel much hopefulness that the ZIAT, at the University of Innsbruck, is already fulfilling one of the very important roles it has set out to have in the world:
that of providing a voice to the myriad still marginalized and oppressed Indigenous communities in America. I, personally and in the name of my community and so many, many more, feel very thankful for this admirable and visionary undertaking. Through it, the University of Innsbruck has achieved the potential of placing itself, in this truly great and beautiful country of Austria, in the position of opening hearts in many other countries to the need of welcoming Indigenous ideas concerning how to and why encourage, promote and find application for Amerindian sentiments on and definitions of identity and citizenship in the Americas themselves and in the world.

As a result of more than five centuries of colonial (and “post-colonial”) duress, it will, for yet more time, be impossible for a whole family of peoples, that of the Americas, to come forward amongst the family of all peoples and make its voice heard, a voice which many people around the world are now anxious and desirous to hear, for in our global human family, no one’s voice is negligible. We will survive and prosper all together, or not at all. In the name of my Indigenous community of the Americas, I applaud the University of Innsbruck and the Zentrum für Interamerikanischen Studien for having been first in the world to give place and life to that basic human principle.

Meine sehr beliebte Freunde und Verwandten, vielen, vielen Dank!

Georges Sioui