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HOST: Learning requires exploration of one's identity, and according to our next speaker, this is a First People's principle of learning that applies to all of us. So on this international day of translation, and at this time when we can't greet each other in person and with physical contact, this is an opportunity to communicate better with each other. To identify each other and ourselves with clarity and humility. Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Paige Raibmon, CIFAR fellow and professor in the Department of History at UBC.

PAIGE RAIBMON: Hi everyone. My name is Paige Raibmon. I'm a historian of settler descent. My ancestors came to Canada from Hungary, Sweden, and the Russian and Polish shtetls. I grew up live in and currently raise my family on the territory of the Qmuskiem people on the banks of the Fraser River. And I'm grateful to live there. I'm also grateful to be here today on the territory of the Algonquin nation. Remarkably I think, entire cities sit on top of these unceded lands, Vancouver, my home and Ottawa, Gatineau the capital region.

My thoughts today are my own. I do not speak for Indigenous people or as an Indigenous person. I've learned from many teachers whose influence I acknowledge and represent here. So what I've just done by way of introduction, is to situate myself. And my knowledge I've told you who I am, where I'm from, where I'm at and who I have learned from. Why take the time to do this, especially in seven minutes? Well, because, and this is one of my key points for today.

Learning requires exploration of one's identity. This is a First People's principle of learning that applies to all of us. It invites non-Indigenous learners like myself to start with our own bounded selves rather than with an Indigenous other. This matters because we all internalize things we learn as children. Our childhood experiences become taken for granted assumptions that we take for the norm.

The boundaries of our worldview remain invisible to us. Those of us with privilege suffer this illusion the longest because society around us reinforces our ideas. Left in place, these assumptions impede best intentioned efforts to understand histories and people different from our own. They limit efforts at greater inclusion and diversity to an "ad and stir" approach, same cup of coffee, different sweetener. Feminists, people of color have pointed out the problem with this for a long time. Left in place, these assumptions also leave us talking about the past instead of about history. Let me explain what I mean. I'm going to take some examples from a social studies textbook that I recently reviewed. The book aimed to improve historical representations of Indigenous peoples, and on this count, it did a good job. It also exemplified the issue that I've just outlined. It contained a lot about the past and was inadequately historical.

That is, it treated concepts that were specific to particular times and places as though they were unbounded and universal. Things Europeans still pass as universal because of the long entwined histories of racism and colonialism. One influential scholar refers in this light to the need provincialize Europe, to demarcate the boundaries around European knowledge, making it situated local and specific.

For example, a well-intentioned lesson plan could emphasize Indigenous people's role in the fur trade with a sentence like "Indigenous peoples were highly skilled at navigating and surviving the wilderness." This makes space for Indigenous presence and simultaneously erases



Indigenous people's ways of knowing their territory. Wilderness after all is a place that humans neither modify nor call home. Indigenous territories were homelands. And there was no wilderness.

Similarly, we could present the range of human interactions with the environment by saying Indigenous peoples use natural resources in unique, sophisticated ways. Again, this constrains Indigenous people at the same time that it makes space for them in our history. Natural resources is a culturally specific market-driven category for thinking about nature. Treating natural resources as a universal category implies that utility always defines the relationship between humans and the environment. That for example a Cedar tree could either be milled for lumber or be carved into a canoe. But what if a cedar tree is your relation? Indigenous peoples configure animacy kin nature and utility in entirely different ways. And we cannot see this. If we try to "add and stir" them into our pre-existing category of natural resources. As I'm outlining our conventional vocabulary attributes, an unbounded universality to many European concepts. And when we use this vocabulary, we reproduce colonialist assumptions.

Where I'm from, it can pass as uncontroversial to say that this man, the first governor of British Columbia, had a responsibility to maintain law and order. Yet this phrase treats law and order as singular as if only the British had law. And it implies that Douglas's responsibility was legitimately bestowed. This is a completely European perspective.

Indigenous peoples have their own systems of law and constitutionality. What Douglas brought was British law and order. And so we might be more specific and clarify that the British do not have a monopoly on law and that their sense of responsibility was self-imposed. Treaties are something that exists within multiple systems of law. And we could try to recognize an Indigenous perspective by noting that Indigenous peoples believed treaties were land sharing agreements. But this implies that Indigenous peoples believed, while Europeans knew, presumably the truth. Europeans don't have a monopoly on truth any more than they do on law. This two-row wampum belt is a legally binding Haudenosaunee document that speaks the truth of Indigenous law. My contention is that these textbook examples are cases of a much broader phenomenon. When we treat categories like natural resources, wilderness, or law as universal, singular, and unbounded, we undermine the diversity and equity we might elsewhere elsewhere aim for in policy and educational initiatives. Before we can seek something called reconciliation, we must admit some things are irreconcilable. We cannot create anti-racist histories by inserting Indigenous characters into the boundaries of our existing narratives and categories.

Thank you.

HOST: Paige Raibmon spoke at The Walrus Talks Boundaries in 2019, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled the stage at The Walrus Talks.

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