

An Exploration of “Ancestors & Elders”

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Interdisciplinary Dialogue

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Discussion

Originally, a fellow student shared the *Ancestors & Elders* Edmonton Journal article with me; she was skeptical about the title and photo and while I shared the same skepticism, wondering if this was a fetishism of Indigeneity, I was also intrigued.¹ I realized that this was the first time that I could recall an intersection of narratives including Indigenous groups of Treaty 6 territory and Ukrainian settlers. Shortly after this, we began a digital story assignment together and decided to focus on the relational aspect of this piece, while bridging to the larger idea of reconciliation, specifically through these two groups sharing space and dance together. However, we quickly realized this was a lofty goal as we began assembling research for our story. As we struggled to find historical and archival resources that discussed Indigenous groups in the Treaty interacting with Ukrainian settlers, we shifted our focus. It seemed clear that we could research the significance of Ukrainian dance with specific regard to Shumka, but while looking into the Indigenous performers involved with the performance like Running Thunder Dancers, we were unable to determine the specific groups that *Ancestors & Elders* would be showcasing (like Nehiyawak for example).

In fact, I struggled on an emotional level to research more historical and archival sources since it required using outdated and racist terms. While cognitively I can understand historical context, and language of the time, coming from a background in social work, I am very aware of my social position. Yan describes social positions are “structurally distributed within a hierarchy of social power that determines people’s access to social, political, and economic resources” and as such I am careful in images or narratives I may be perpetuating through the sources I choose to include in my work.² This project has also provided further reflection in terms of what it means to be a treaty person and a settler on this land, and it brought to the forefront the value and

meaning I place in relational-learning. This is especially further supported in my learning of intercultural practice in social work, and the cultural humility that it embodies. The respect I bring forth to my work can create challenges, as I would rather connect with an individual rather than written word. As we struggled to find the significance of dance to both Indigenous groups and Ukrainian culture, we began to wonder if this was knowledge passed through story and tradition, and not taken into written account.³ Even with my awareness of the Indian Act, I expected to be able to find some sort of significance of any Indigenous group from Treaty 6 Territory, as thought there would be a detailed description beside each dance that was banned. Regardless of this naivety, I did discover the various ways dance can be used: to fulfill religious vows, in celebration or gratitude, or as social events.⁴ However, more important is the deep understanding of dance serving as a form of resistance, like the Plains Cree continuing to perform sun dance though forbidden under the Indian Act.⁵ I believe dance, like food and laughter, has such undeniable power to bond humans; dance as a form of resistance has certainly peaked as an area of personal interest.

Analysis

While we tried to keep the amount of information within our digital presentation balanced, I realize that we unfortunately overlooked a critical piece: the audition calls posted on Theatre Alberta website for this show portray some important feelings that are not captured publicly anywhere else. It states: “We aim to celebrate 125 years of Ukrainian settlement, acknowledge the Indigenous perspective of Canadian history; And foster, in this time of reconciliation, a new Ukrainian-Canadian ally relationship that has eroded over time. Throughout the piece and the process of its creation, we are ‘rooting our efforts in trust and respect’.”⁶ This mention of allyship would have been a very interesting concept to explore within

the capacity of storytelling, however, we returned to the basis of two groups in Alberta's history whose narratives are often presented as separate. Although academics like Myrna Kostash do speak to these nation-to-nation relationships, the narratives of Indigenous peoples welcoming Ukrainian settlement often go unheard by mainstream society. I recognize that I cannot speak to the narrative that *Ancestors & Elders*, yet the simple intersection of these two historical group experiences together in a contemporary performance lends itself to an assumption of an alternative narrative.⁷ While Welch speaks to the link between language and identity, this also speaks to the connection of dance and ceremony to identity.⁸ Ceremony, dance, and language are a representation of ways of knowing and being, and relationships to the self, others, and the environment. This performance has great potential to explore the similarities that bring us together and the acceptance of differences.

Cannon states the most urgent challenge is finding common ground, a "new set of possibilities – and collaborations – aimed at the building of alliances, and at the rejuvenation of our historic, treaty-based, and nation-to-nation partnerships."⁹ Perhaps an unpopular view, Canada's history of colonialism and its ongoing implications offers that common ground. This context alone speaks to an interconnectedness that needs to be recognized, honored, and upheld. Though this performance piece may not fall under the conversation of pedagogy, it certainly has the potential to provide the space for dialogue and connection, especially as "relevant outreach and educational events/programs will be part of the project as well."¹⁰ However, it is important to stay critical of this as this educational programming is only listed on Shumka's website and does not indicate if any of the Indigenous artists or performers will be joining them, which brings up the questions of whose story is more valued and valid? Will colonialism be talked about? This is significant as the Truth & Reconciliation Call's to Action speak to collaborative working

relationships based on “mutual recognition, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for maintaining those relationships into the future”; while I cannot speak to if the performance of *Ancestors & Elders* is an act of reconciliation, or even resistance, it holds contemporary significance in making supporting space for dialogue about these nations’ stories, and reconciliation in an accessible space outside of academia, potentially facilitating new understandings for individuals who are not engaging with reconciliation.¹¹ This relationship-building is fundamental not only to intercultural practice but allyship as well.

In conclusion, this project has held personal significance for me. As a white settler of Ukrainian ancestry, with family members who purchased land directly from the Crown, I have often used academic assignments as a framework to navigate my own history and path forward. This performance offers safety and common ground in exploring treaty responsibilities and reconciliation those who is very much guarded with their interpretation of history. It is my hopes that *Ancestors & Elders* will be an effective tool in bridging some of these more difficult conversations initiating dialogue between Ukrainian Canadian immigrants and settlers and Indigenous peoples for reconciliation and moving forward.

End Notes

1. Fish Griwkowsky, “Indigenous and Ukrainian cultures meet in April Shumka show, Ancestors and Elders,” *Edmonton Journal*, January 18, 2018, <http://edmontonjournal.com/entertainment/music/indigenous-and-ukrainian-cultures-meet-in-april-shumka-show-ancestors-and-elders>.

2. Miu Chung Yan, “Multiple Positionality and Intersectionality: Toward a Dialogical Social Work Approach,” in *Diversity and Social Work in Canada*, ed. Alean Al-Krenawi, John R. Graham, and Nazim Habibov (Don Mills, ONT: Oxford University Press, 2016), 115.

3. Andriy Nahachewsky, *Ukrainian Dance: A Cross-Cultural Approach* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2012), 10.

4. Charlotte Heith, ed., *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions* (Washington: National Museum of the American Indian Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 125.

5. David G. Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative*

Study, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1979), 48; Katherine Pettipas, *Severing the Ties That Bind: Government Repression of Indigenous Religious Ceremonies on the Prairies* (Winnipeg, MN: University of Manitoba Press, 1994), eBook, 109.

6. “Shumka Audition Announcement,” last modified October 6, 2017, <http://www.theatrealberta.com/2017/10/06/audition-edmonton-ancestors-elders-ukrainian-shumka-dancers/>

7. Myrna Kostash, “On Gifted Ground: One Ukrainian-Alberta reflects on forebears, Ukrainian and Aboriginal,” accessed February 20, 2018, <https://www.myrnakostash.com/pdf/on-gifted-ground.pdf>

8. David Welch, “The Franco-Ontarian Community: From Resistance to New Social Solidarities and Economic Challenges,” in *Diversity and Social Work in Canada*, ed. Alean Al-Krenawi, John R. Graham, and Nazim Habibov (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2016), 169.

9. Martin J. Cannon, “Changing the Subject in Teacher Education: Centring Indigenous, Diasporic, and Settler Colonial Relations,” in *Racism, Colonialism, and Indigeneity in Canada: A Reader* (2nd ed.), ed. Martin J. Cannon and Lina Sunseri (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2018), 163.

10. “Ancestors & Elders,” accessed January 25, 2018, <https://www.shumka.com/performances-programs/ancestors-elders/>.

11. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Calls to Action”, 5.

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