

Notes from Canadian Philosophical Association Memorial session in honour of the work of Bruce Ferguson, on promoting dialogue between indigenous and academic philosophers. June 4th, 2019 on UBC campus.

We acknowledge that the meeting takes place on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam people.

There were three speakers at the panel:

Sylvia Berryman - introduction and some thoughts on Bruce's hope for dialogue

Romy Kozak - spoke about Bruce's work at Kwantlen University

Alison Wylie - talked about her work on new models for collaborative practice between First Nations communities and academics, and how this speaks to Bruce's ideas about dialogue. Honoured guests include Bruce's sister Myrna and his close friend Ali. Other Canadian philosophers who had corresponded with Bruce over his survey, but had never met him, joined the conversation.

Bruce Ferguson (Algonquin) was an undergraduate student of philosophy. He came to academia as a mature student after a lifetime as an activist in First Nations politics and housing issues. He thought of his retirement project as trying to bring academic philosophy and indigenous philosophy into dialogue. He was indefatigable: despite facing ongoing health issues, he constructed a website with resources on indigenous philosophy; published an academic article, 'Alternative Routes: Starting from Story'; conducted a survey of Canadian philosophers and a report to the Canadian Philosophical Association; hosted a panel discussion at the Kwantlen Aboriginal Students Association; and was appointed to the CPA Equity Committee, a rare honour for an undergraduate.

Bruce also had plans for an online journal, a radio station (WTRM - Where the Rivers Meet, from which this website gets its name), and a book about his vision. He was conscious of the shortness of time left to him, and was planning chapters of this book even as he was hospitalized. He had plans for a community consultation process on concerns about cultural appropriation and ways to integrate indigenous thought into mainstream classrooms: we were successful in a joint grant application (with Nic Fillion from SFU) to fund this process, in consultation with UBC First Nations Studies. Bruce was undergoing chemotherapy in 2018, which sapped his energies during the last two years of life. He died in November 2017, before he had a chance to make further progress with his projects.

Our hope for today's session is both to honour Bruce's work, and to continue a dialogue about the possibilities for making mainstream academic philosophy more open and inclusive.

In his article, Bruce Ferguson describes himself as 'a long-time activist, member of the Kitigan-Zibi Anishinabeg, Algonquin First Nation, and student at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.' I met Bruce through his outreach survey to Canadian academic philosophers in 2017, and we subsequently had several talks about his interest in bringing indigenous contents to academic philosophy.

One of Bruce's particular concerns, which became apparent during the survey, were that nonindigenous academics often shied away from engagement with indigenous philosophy because of concerns about lack of expertise or about cultural appropriation, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle. In North America, there are only a handful of scholars from indigenous backgrounds with PhDs in philosophy. He began by conducting a survey, writing to all Canadian academic philosophers with university appointments, asking them to respond to six questions: whether they believed indigenous philosophy had a place in mainstream curriculum, what ways they included indigenous content in philosophy courses etc. (The survey questions and his report can be found on this website.) He wrote a report for the CPA based on what he learned. In the aftermath of this, Bruce had a conversation with Dr. Daniel Justice, chair of the department of First Nations and Indigenous Studies at UBC, who encouraged him to take the concerns about cultural appropriation seriously. The result of this was Bruce's plan for a community consultation process with urban First Nations communities in the lower mainland, funded by a grant from UBC's Equity Enhancement Fund. Unfortunately this planned consultation process was curtailed by his illness.

Bruce was interested in fostering dialogue, and had a wonderful way of bringing people together. He was unintimidated by academic hierarchies and bureaucracy. He believed that academic work and study of mainstream philosophy could be of great value for indigenous students in confronting injustices in mainstream society and building tools for political struggle.

Bruce hoped that indigenous content in mainstream academic philosophy wouldn't be limited to social-political questions, but would include attention to different worldviews, epistemologies and metaphysical issues. He believed that it might be possible to transform academic philosophy to make it more inclusive and attractive to indigenous students, but also to expand academic philosophy beyond its typically eurocentric vision.

I believe that Bruce's energy and his warmth and commitment to inclusiveness are an inspiration to those who would like to include more engagement with indigenous philosophy but feel a sense of inadequacy. He might have played a huge role for us as guide in fostering dialogue between communities. He believed in overcoming barriers, and believed it was possible to create 'indigenous spaces' within academia: I remember once he phrased the idea in a simple four words. Door's open, everybody speaks. That's only a beginning, of course, and there are some difficult and painful conversations that need to happen: about the colonialism built into our education system; about privilege and how we reenact it; about the disempowerment that came with the Residential Schools and legacy of that travesty. There are questions for philosophy as a discipline, about the ways we talk and what it is we talk about, and how these boundary disputes about what is 'really philosophy' limit our vision.

These are difficult conversations, and ones that any philosopher reflective about the shape of the discipline would want to take seriously. I only wish Bruce were here to help us with those conversations.

Sylvia Berryman