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DIALOGUE

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‘This Is Who I Am’

ABSTRACT

This dialogue between Anishinaabe scholar and filmmaker, Calvin Hartwig, and board member Mark Turin explores Indigenous identity, language revitalization, reclamation and resurgence and the pernicious legacy of settler colonialism.

Mark Turin: Your powerful and moving short film is entitled ‘This Is Who I Am’. Can I start by asking you, Calvin, who you are?

Kalvin Hartwig: My English name is Calvin Hartwig, and my traditional name is *Mishkwa-Desi*. I am Bear Clan Anishinaabe from the Sault Sainte Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians.¹ Our main reservation lies just south of the Medicine Line (also known as the international border between the United States and Canada) near the southeastern shores of Lake Superior. North of the Medicine Line is the Garden River First Nation. At one time, we were essentially one community, but the settlers cut us in half when they drew and enforced their border.

To some extent, at least, I believe that we have all been colonized, and in that I would include the colonizers themselves. I work hard to

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1. ‘Chippewa’ is another way of saying ‘Ojibwe’. The Ojibwe are one subgroup of the greater Anishinaabe Nation.

decolonize myself and support strengthening traditional Anishinaabe core values despite constant pressures from the dominant society to live up to Western values. For me, a very significant part of that decolonizing work is revitalizing our language, which settlers have tried very hard to take away from us.

Some of our Elders tell us that our language, culture and spirituality cannot be separated from one another, and that they are all critical for maintaining our identity as Anishinaabe people and for healing from the colonizing we continue to endure. A fine example is laid out by the late Dan Jones(-ban) on the spiritual aspects of our language, *Anishinaabemowin* (ojibwedigitalarchive 2012: n.pag.). Much like the way that German is divided into three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter), *Anishinaabemowin* is divided into two categories (animate and inanimate). Nouns that have a spirit are considered animate, including those that would be considered inanimate in English, such as sacred drums, pipes and tobacco. In other words, when describing these materials and substances in *Anishinaabemowin*, they are spoken of as other animate beings, in the same way that people, animals and trees are. Such nouns are pluralized in a particular way, verbs that are only used with animate nouns can be utilized and transitive verbs are conjugated in a particular way when beings do things with other beings. This is distinct from the verbs we use when beings do something with an inanimate object, such as a table or chair, which would be conjugated differently.

MT: You have lived in both the United States and Canada – bridging this artificial and colonial boundary as your studies and work have taken you back and forth. As an Indigenous scholar and filmmaker, do you find one of these two settler colonial countries more generative for your work?

KH: Both the United States and Canada are settler states with certain pros and cons for my work depending on the given situation. In Canada, for example, I have found more logistical support as an independent filmmaker, and we have an incredible opportunity with the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Through our partnership with the NFB, our short film has screened in hundreds of classrooms. This is particularly exciting as it offers an opportunity to teach about Indigeneity to thousands more students than we would likely have been able to reach without the partnership. In the United States as well as from Tribes south of the Medicine Line, I have raised more cash donations.

More interesting than which country I find more generative for my work is that I feel at home amongst Indigenous folks on both sides of the Medicine Line. I have been welcomed and morally supported on each side equally for my film work and research, a revealing illustration of how our shared Indigenous identities can overcome an artificial and colonial boundary.

MT: How did the idea of this film come to you? Why did you feel that this story in particular needed to be told?

KH: For my undergraduate thesis research on Anishinaabe language revitalization, I conducted interviews with Elders from my Tribe and the Garden River

First Nation. One Elder expressed his real concern that not enough young people were learning our language, *Anishinaabemowin*, to keep it – and our identity as Anishinaabe people – from falling asleep. He asked me a question to which I did not know the answer: how can we encourage more young people to take up their heritage language and culture? This question has stayed with me.

A few years later, Manuel Ibanez, co-founder of the Global Indigenous Youth Caucus of which I was a member, proposed an idea to me: let us make a short film to which Indigenous youth from around the world can relate. He asked me what the film could be about and it struck me right away that we could take the opportunity to answer the Elder’s question and encourage more youth to learn their heritage languages and cultures. This is something that currently affects most, if not all, Indigenous Nations around the world.

In short, I produced ‘This Is Who I Am’ largely to encourage Indigenous youth to take responsibility for the work of decolonization and for strengthening our Indigenous identities. Language is a key aspect to the work.

MT: *What excites you about film, as a medium, for helping Indigenous youth to connect with cultural traditions, language and heritage? What are the strengths of film and what might be its limitations?*

KH: Most people, including Indigenous youth, enjoy a good film. Through film we can embed a message that, if done right, is just as entertaining and stimulating as it is inspiring. The trick is to not beat someone over the head with a given message if we want them to go home with it.

Of course, after watching a film, not everyone expresses that they are inspired to change their life. But I do imagine that we are planting seeds with this film, and with the right types of nourishment from other sources, these individuals may take up our message later in life.

MT: *Please tell us a little more about your film, ‘This Is Who I Am’.*

KH: The protagonist, a young Anishinaabe woman living in New York City, is feeling lost about her identity. In this short fictional film, we play with (and later challenge) Romantic concepts such as urban vs. rural, with the protagonist overwhelmed by the concrete and hustle and bustle of the city. She is distraught that she does not speak her mother tongue, and wonders what her ancestors would do in this perplexing situation. After a series of short events, she understands exactly what she is to do.

All of the principal creative filmmakers involved in the production are Indigenous, with roots across several continents. At the time, our team were living in Montreal and New York City, and in typical Hollywood fashion, our production took place in both cities as well to save costs. Most of the over 60 people from around the world who helped put the project together volunteered their time. Funding came from a variety of sources: personal donations, in-kind donations, crowdfunding, donations from institutions including Tribal governments and fundraising events such as silent auctions. Even though the film is currently on circuit and touring, we still have bills to pay, which is why we continue to accept donations and charge screening fees.

'This Is Who I Am' was my first production and I was learning filmmaking as I went, including the fundraising angle. Learning the hard way was slower going than I wanted, so I enrolled in a graduate Communications program at Concordia University in Montreal to acquire more of the skills that I wanted and needed as the film's producer. As a student, I met with key individuals and discovered important resources that helped make the production a reality.

In 2017, we held our international premiere of 'This Is Who I Am' at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to great fanfare. It has screened at multiple film festivals, including the prestigious LA SKINS FEST in Hollywood, and at various events and conferences around the world. Very importantly, we continue to screen the film at schools and in Indigenous communities. High school students and those in post-secondary education seem to absorb our messaging easily, but we've also screened for middle school students with success.

MT: Over the last years, I have watched with excitement as Indigenous communities across Turtle Island [North America] have re-introduced land-based education and learning programs on traditional, ancestral territory, reasserting food sovereignty and highlighting the importance of place-based, geographic knowledge. At the same time, ever more Indigenous youth are living away from their traditional homelands – for education and for work. Given your experience, how is digital media helping to bridge these spatial and temporal gaps?

KH: I use our short film to encourage a teaching that it is never too late, nor too far from our traditional homes, to begin learning about our heritage and owning our traditional responsibilities. Everyone has their own life journey, and sometimes that journey may be away from traditional homelands.

Digital media can help bridge the divide for people living far away from their culture's knowledge keepers. For example, I know someone of Anishinaabe descent learning about her heritage and language through digital media but currently living in Switzerland. For some teachings, she may have to come to *Anishinaabewaki* (~Anishinaabe country) to learn, but there are some traditional teachings to which she has access while in Switzerland, which are giving her a foundation from which to work. Digital media is not always used to connect learners far from their traditional homelands. In some cultures, knowledge keepers may themselves have become diasporic through processes of migration, moving to new places such as New York City. In such cases, those who remain in the traditional homelands may be using digital media to connect with and learn from traditional knowledge keepers who have moved away.

MT: Non-Indigenous individuals in mainstream settler society often express scepticism about Indigenous language revitalization projects. While there are many ways of explaining the importance and the utility of this work, what does it mean to you, and what message would you like non-Indigenous viewers to carry forward having watched your film?

KH: The main audience for our film are Indigenous youth, but there are also messages for non-Indigenous viewers. For one, we want more non-Indigenous viewers to not only know that we still exist, but also that we

exist outside of romanticized realms, including in international cities. And while some of us live outside of traditional homelands, we can be – and still are – Indigenous. We do not need to discard our identities at the doorstep of the city.

Not only have some non-Indigenous viewers been personally moved, asking how they can support Indigenous peoples and language revitalization movements, but others have decided to learn more about their heritage languages and cultures in response to viewing the film. For example, one young woman began learning Bulgarian, her mother’s language, while another viewer decided to travel to Athens to learn old Greek recipes from her grandmother.

MT: *The Trudeau and Biden administrations have a mixed record in terms of Indigenous engagement and substantive reconciliation. On the one hand, systemic racism in policing, health, education and the judicial system remains unchecked, and resource extraction and pipelines running through Native land continue unabated. On the other hand, Bill C-91 – An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages – was enacted in Canada in 2019; while in the US, the appointment of Deb Haaland as Secretary of the Interior marks the first time that an Indigenous woman has reached the rank of Cabinet secretary. How hopeful and optimistic are you that these current administrations will be supportive of the goals of your community and of other Indigenous communities across Turtle Island?*

KH: The passing of Bill C-91 and appointment of Deb Haaland are arguably huge achievements that are worth celebrating. But settler states and their institutions are inherently colonial, so I strongly suspect whatever good comes from these historic achievements will be more focused on harm reduction and not decolonization, per se. Harm reduction is good, but for full healing to take place, our worlds need to become decolonized. These achievements might help us come to a place where true decolonization can occur, but only time will tell.

Genocide was originally defined to be the killing of a targeted People by any means, not just through outright murder, but also by taking away key elements of their identity, including language. Canada and the United States – systematically and with intention – attempted genocide on the Peoples Indigenous to this land, through policies aimed at killing our languages as well as other policies such as forced sterilization, relocation, termination, forcing attendance of boarding/residential schools, etc. The goal of the colonial state was to assimilate Indigenous Peoples and make them act and think like settlers, not just because people in power thought we would live better lives as they defined it, but because they wanted to end nation-to-nation relationships and responsibilities that bound them through treaties, and they wanted access to the land and its resources. In many ways, the colonizing continues.

If the United States and Canada were truly remorseful for the acts of genocide on Indigenous Peoples, including the targeted and explicit acts of violence towards our languages and identities, then they would be all-hands-on-deck trying to support every single Indigenous Nation working to revitalize their language who asked for assistance. This would probably mean many billions of dollars spent each year, a gathering of the brightest minds and an honest conversation with Indigenous Nations as to what it is that we want

and need, undertaken with the full intention of actually serving those wants and needs.

Many Indigenous communities and individuals are working incredibly hard to revitalize our languages. Some of this work is through programs funded by grants. In the United States, the Federal government offers a few highly competitive grants to Tribes involved in language revitalization efforts. There are at least 574 Federally recognized Tribal Nations, but only a few grants on offer in any given year. And these grants are restrictive and temporary, which is not a sustainable solution for work as intensive and long-term as language revitalization. It can be argued that government grants aimed at language revitalization are in fact colonial in themselves, making it more difficult for us to revitalize our languages in the long term.

If, for example, a Tribe wants to win a Federal grant to support its language revitalization, it first must research the grant and its stipulations. The Tribe must then follow the dozens of rules and regulations for the application, using a non-Indigenous language, organizational system and set of values to express their intent. If the Tribe is fortunate enough to win the grant after competing with many others – whose languages are also going ‘extinct’ as some linguists would say – then the winning Tribe must follow all the rules laid out by the Federal government on how to use that money. If on the ground, the Tribe learns of a better way to revitalize their language, its members must first seek permission from the Federal government before spending the money or making any changes to the implementation of the program. It can take many weeks or months to receive a response from the Federal government, which can come in the form of further questions, leading to more delays to adjustment in the program. Sometimes, responses do not come before the grant program expires. For even the most successful Indigenous communities, it takes decades to transform the state of their languages, and yet Federal grants are usually no more than one to five years in length. In addition, there is no guarantee that a Tribe that competes to receive a grant one year will win it again the next time they apply, creating continuity challenges and funding gaps which together reduce the chance of overall success for that community’s language revitalization.

In outlining all of this, I in no way seek to take away from or diminish the important and good work that such grants have done for communities and our languages, and in particular, I wish to thank the many good-hearted individuals who are working incredibly hard with limited resources to do as much good as they can. Rather, I wish to point out that Canada and the United States can and should be doing a lot more. I also wish to underscore that it is through the explicit actions of the colonial powers that our languages are now in such dire straits.

MT: Your film – ‘This Is Who I Am’ – has been extremely well-received and is being shown in schools and on college campuses across the world. Were you surprised by the reception and interest? And what are you working on now... what is your next project or projects?

KH: You are too kind! But no, I did not envision how far our short film would travel, nor that thousands of young people would be watching it, taking in our messages on identity and Indigeneity in particular. I also did not foresee how difficult it would be to produce the film, the first one I have made. However, when Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people come to me and tell me

that the film changed their life, I know all the hard work and years of pre- and post-production have been worth it.

'This Is Who I Am' is still on circuit after five years, so that keeps me busy. I am also distributing two other short films; writing a full-feature, multi-layered fictional film on the complexities of present-day First Nations identity; producing *Anishinaabemowin* instructional videos and in the pre-writing phases on a documentary about my personal journey of learning my language as well as a period full-feature based on a true story. I look forward to finding or creating opportunities that will support me learning *Anishinaabemowin* on a full-time basis.

As we are still needing to pay for post-production and distribution costs, if readers are interested in offering us a donation, we would be truly grateful. They can write a cheque to:

Endangered Language Alliance
3 West 18th Street
Floor 6
New York, NY 10011
USA

Please write 'This Is Who I Am film' in the subject line. This is important so the donation gets funnelled to the correct budget.

Readers can also offer a donation via PayPal and can learn more about donating to us here: <https://www.elalliance.org/our-work/arts-and-culture/films>

Readers can learn more about our film here: <http://thisiswhoiamthefilm.com/>.



Figure 1: Still from 'This Is Who I Am', with French subtitles, 2022. © 2022 Calvin Hartwig. All rights reserved.



Figure 2: Still from 'This Is Who I Am', Marie-Celine Einish, New York City, 2016. © 2017 Calvin Hartwig.



Figure 3: Still from 'This Is Who I Am', Marie-Celine Einish, New York City, 2016. © 2017 Calvin Hartwig.



Figure 4: Still from 'This Is Who I Am', Marie-Celine Einish, Montréal, 2016. © 2017 Kalvin Hartwig.



Figure 5: Still from 'This Is Who I Am', Marie-Celine Einish, New York City, 2016. © 2017 Kalvin Hartwig.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Kalvin Hartwig (Anishinaabe, Bear Clan) is an award-winning filmmaker and member of the Sault Sainte Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. Specializing in Indigenous rights and Indigeneity, Calvin earned an MA in international relations from Yale University. Additionally, he holds a graduate diploma in communication studies from Concordia University of Montreal. His particular interests lie in strengthening Indigenous identities and Anishinaabe language and culture, as well as the production and screenwriting of films. Besides filmmaking, Calvin also enjoys writing, drawing and traditional craft-work. He currently serves as *Anishinaabemowin gikinoo'amaagewin weninang* (~Anishinaabe language and culture coordinator) for the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians.

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Mark Turin is an anthropologist, linguist and occasional radio presenter, and an associate professor at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Western Canada. He is cross-appointed between the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies and the Department of Anthropology. Before joining UBC, Turin taught at Yale and Cambridge Universities. For over twenty years, Turin's regional focus has been the Himalayan region (particularly Nepal, northern India and Bhutan), and, more recently, the Pacific Northwest. He is the author or co-author of four books and three travel guides, and the editor of twelve volumes. He also edits a series on oral literature.

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