CHAPTER ELEVEN

Be prepared to win: Indigenous struggles and the radical imagination

An interview with Sherry Pictou

Sherry Pictou is a Mi'kmaw woman from L'stikuk (Water Cuts Through High Rocks), Nova Scotia. She graduated with her PhD from Dalhousie University and has been recently appointed as an Assistant Professor in Women's Studies focusing on Indigenous feminism at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her research interests are decolonization of treaty relations, women's role in food and lifeways in land based practices, and Indigenous refusal politics. Max Haiven interviewed Sherry in June, 2016.

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Max Haiven : You've said that the question of how you arrived at a radical consciousness is a difficult one for you. Why?

Sherry Pictou: It's such a difficult question for marginalized people because, from a very early age, I knew that something was different, that somehow we were different. I'm not sure how radical it was, but it was off the beaten path. I was brought up on a small reservation in the late 1960s where we had to attend a public school. From day one I knew something was very different. It was a horrible experience; nasty. I didn't know at the time it was racism, but I was conscious of somehow being different, and was always walking on eggshells. As soon as I left the reserve I knew I was in a

different sphere, all of us kids knew that. The experience of school was counter to how I was raised with my grandmother and some of the older folks in the community. I was very conscious that we were Mi'kmaq, that there was something called treaties, and that we never signed over our land. As I went through school I really started to question why we were so different, compared to what the old people were telling me about our community. At the time we were also experiencing severe social problems with alcoholism and so forth.

My radical consciousness came into being when I realized there were outside forces influencing life on the reservation, which caused things like inadequate housing. Until I was 12 or 13, I was brought up without running water. I had to lug water and use outhouses. I experienced all sort of things. But when I was 19, I had my son. The sub-regional office of Indian Affairs used to be in downtown Halifax and at that time, Indian Affairs was downloading some services to band councils, but not all of the programs. There were certain things that you still had to go and apply for at the office, including sub-standard housing. I had a broken firebox in the woodstove and I had this baby boy, so I applied for a propane heater or something to help out but never got a response. To make a long story short, I ended up adopting us out to an extended family in Eskasoni and they ended up raising my son. But months later I directly inquired in person as to what happened to this request for this propane heater. Usually there was a Mi'kmaw social worker, at the office, but she was on leave and this non-Mi'kmaw woman in the office put all the blame on the Mi'kmaw woman. Later it was found out that there was some kind of office politics and she was trying to get this Mi'kmaw woman removed. As a consequence, my son and my case became involved in that process. That was probably a turning point for me, along with seeing the simultaneous situations in the community.

So it's hard for me to point out one particular point when this radical consciousness came. But I think after that experience and the experiences in my community, I started putting two and two together, and I started questioning everything, and have questioned everything since then.

MH: How did that lead you to the different forms of activism you've been engaged in since that time?

SP: Once I realized that there were outside influences on our community and others were experiencing them as well, I struggled to gain some type of insight. Those influences eventually led me to university as a mature student. The first thing I was trying to understand was where all that money from Indian Affairs was coming from—or not coming from—and why there was inadequate housing. I also wanted to know about how Indian Affairs was using audits to police the community's finances. So I took a correspondence course through Acadia University to understand these audits. Later, when I attended university, I majored in Political Science and Atlantic Canadian Studies and, bit-by-bit, it started coming together. I was exposed to the policies of the Federal and Provincial governments and began to understand why things were happening. I recognized that there was this contradiction between assimilative policies and segregationist policies. Residential schools are one example and the reserve system is another. I mean, when I was a child, non-natives weren't allowed on the reserve after sunset; this was part of the Indian Act which has since been changed, but it gives you a sense of that contradiction between assimilation and segregation.

I struggled through academia doing a Bachelor of Education. The experience took me back to grade four or five when I was in elementary school and had to learn about my people as savages. We weren't properly named and our history was misrepresented. During my BEd program we were made to take an education psychology course and it was my lowest mark. We read statistical analyses of the dropout rates and education indicators of people from lower socio-economic classes, and here I was in the class, someone who shouldn't have been there, studying this. So again, my experience was denied. But when I did my Master's I got to discover people like Paulo Friere, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Myles Horton, who founded the Highlander Center in Tennessee, and that's when the world started making sense to me. I thought, "Okay, it's alright to have an alternative point of view, it's alright to be who we are historically, traditionally," because I knew that there was this other, dominant reality that was being imposed on us.

I guess that's when I began struggling at all times to bring Indigenous reality to the forefront. It led me to sitting on the Band Council of my community, to eventually sitting as Chief, which was a paradox because then you're receiving federal funding that is tied up with all kinds of strings. I remember one time, in response to us refusing to follow a certain policy, Indian Affairs wanted to put our

community under third party management, even though we hadn't even run a deficit. The trick has always been trying to maneuver around policies and finances to meet the real needs of your community. So I've always had that critical perspective, I've always tried to honour the ways people were evolving in my community, and their realities of hunting and fishing and so forth. We tried to establish programs that would honour that while navigating the bureaucracy.

And then the Marshall Decision came down in 1999, when the Canadian courts acknowledged our people's treaty rights to hunt and fish for a livelihood. I always say that fishing chose me, I didn't choose fishing. I say this because, for several years, fishing dominated the political agenda of organizations and our relationships with non-Indigenous fishermen. It was really difficult to explain to others how fishing was only one of many issues we were dealing with in our communities. That was a hard experience. It's still difficult for me to talk about because there were different political and economic realities that came out of the woodwork. But one thing that really came to light was the power of privatization and the corporate sector.

This of course led to my community joining the World Forum of Fisher Peoples in 2002. When we first read the preamble of the Forum's constitution, it described exactly what we were trying to do in that organization: create a sustainable livelihood rooted in our culture. From 2006-2014 I served as Co-Chair and during that time we advocated for international guidelines for the Rights of Small Scale Fisheries. This was passed at the United Nations in 2014. Canada became the only country to refuse to pass the guidelines until we managed to mobilize support here and from scholars around the world. We are now trying to ensure that we remain involved in how these guidelines are implemented.

MH: The struggle around the fisheries and treaty rights and oceans brings us to a theme we're exploring a lot in this book, which is the question of the commons as both an idea and a reality. I've really learned a lot from the work you and Martha Stiegman have done about the Mi'kmaq idea of *Netukulimk*.[1] Do you see that term as akin to the idea of the commons?

SP: This is something I've been contemplating. I'm also probably not pronouncing the word right; I've heard elders argue about how to pronounce it and there are varied interpretations. If you talk

to some linguists they'll say it means just "making a livelihood" or "living off the land." And others have interpreted it as "taking no more than what you need." There are a lot of Indigenous concepts like that throughout Canada. And what they all indicate to me is a relationship with the natural environment, with the world around you.

Where commons becomes problematic... now, I have to back up a bit, because this is what was so scary about what happened to the fisheries. At one point, fisheries were considered a common resource. Now they've been privatized; those fish are starting to be owned, in a way. This happens time and time again, and I've been doing a lot of thinking about it. Commons becomes problematic when you even look at the word and its origin in modern times. It's juxtaposed against private property. It's one side of a binary. Here in Canada, reserve land is actually officially Crown Land, in other words land held in common by the Crown. It's so ironic and revealing that Stephen Harper, on his way out, passed bill C-48, which amended voting procedures in the Indian Act to enable the privatization of reserve land. But this is an old pattern, if the commons are in that binary with private property.

We've had learning circles with people from across Canada, particularly Indigenous people, trying to come up with a notion of commons. It's always been an aspirational notion I think, and in reality, today, I'm not sure if there's a difference between public property and the commons. That's where it becomes problematic. The non-Indigenous clam diggers on the Bay of Fundy have taught me a lot about this, because we have a lot in common with them. They're always being propositioned by the government to take a lease on the wild clam beds they harvest, so they can have private control over them. But a lot of them won't do it, first because they know that Bear River First Nation is nearby and we might have something to say about it, but second because they don't want to repeat the structure of owning a common resource as private property. They've seen how it works when a private company gets ownership of a beach and closes it off, so it's counterintuitive for them.

But there's a bigger problem too. You could have a little piece of property, even hold it as a commons. But if there's a big disaster like an oil spill that affects a large territory, that affects the groundwater, what's the good of the commons then? Bruce Kneen writes about this and he tries to come up with alternatives. The idea of common property must mean that private property exists,

by contrast. And so what are you really transforming? That's not to take away from the work being done by people trying to coexist in common areas. However, you have to think about it. At first glance the commons is a really appealing concept, but when we look into it I'm not sure that we fully know what it means.

So I boil it down to this: what we need to do is to really explore what we mean by property, and what we really mean by a piece of land, whether it's common or private? Are we talking about owning nature again? Are we trying to own something, or should we be exploring our relationship to it? And that's where I think the resurgence of Indigenous perspectives is so important. It's very difficult for this resurgence to take place amidst neoliberalism and colonialism. But it means asking: what are the relationships between people and land? And I think Indigenous people and all people living on the northern part of Turtle Island can visit that. What is their relationship to the land? Once we explore that then perhaps we can move forward with what needs to happen. That's the short answer, but it's very complicated.

MH: One of the concerns we have, as people who've used the term commons a lot and have a real fidelity to it, but who are also settlers on Mi'kmaq lands, is that the idea of the commons might be a Eurocentric concept with colonial implications. There is this tendency among some scholars to make this easy equivalence between the worldviews and practices of the Western European peasants, from whom we derive the word "commons," and of Indigenous people. We are worried there's a kind of linguistic and conceptual colonialism going on that allows settlers to first of all lump all sorts of Indigenous people together and second to imagine that they can all be held within this idea of the commons that just doesn't fit. But then maybe there are other, older, grounded traditions or ideas, like *Netukulimk*, that we should be thinking through, concepts and practices that are Indigenous to these lands and these relationships.

SP: The idea of the commons is probably an attempt to try to understand a relationship to land. And as we well know, Marx himself, in his later writings, was starting to come to terms with this a bit. I think there's a danger in terms of trying to do this kind of categorization. What are you categorizing: Indigenous people, or the land? There's a danger in using the terminology of geopolitical borders or nation-states to describe Indigenous peoples for a

number of reasons. And I think Canadians are now becoming aware of just how diverse Indigenous communities within Canada are. You have the Mi'kmaq and other Northeastern Woodland peoples, but then you start going to the prairies... the Blackfoot on the prairies think differently than the Haida on the coast, and that diversity in itself opens up an exploratory discussion of how those people lived in relation to those lands and ecosystems. Here in the Atlantic, there's some work that was done by Trudy Sable, Bernie Francis, and Roger Lewis that illuminates the traditional so-called hunting districts. They weren't boundaries per se, they were actually defined by river systems and all the relationships bound up in that.

I think the commons is a very Eurocentric notion, but it's difficult to find the language for how to discuss these concepts. I'm even becoming uncomfortable with using words like territory, sovereignty, ceded and unceded because it's the language of a legal jurisprudence of another culture. And sometimes we're forced into using that language. But it distracts us from the relational understandings we might have within those natural environments.

There's a great book that just came out by Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods*. They centre Indigenous worldviews but within the context of environmental studies. I think that's a starting place, based on the question: what are our relationships? I think this work has already started and we're seeing more and more collaborative efforts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples against the state, against corporations, against fracking, mining, and the fisheries. I think this is a good thing, though there are problems in the dynamics of those types of coalitions and a lot of dangers for social movements and struggles in terms of who controls or directs them, and whose interest they serve. But I think there are excellent examples of coming-together around what people will tolerate in terms of what's happening to the land.

Hopefully that will be a start. Once we can determine what our relationship is to the lands, to the waters, then we can figure out some ways that we can—I don't even want to use the word coexist but, can exist, all of us, in a way that protects those lands and waters, in a way that sustains life. I know that sounds a little bit sensationalized, but unless we understand those relations I don't think we're going to be able to move forward. We will always be faced with this form of neoliberalism that's undermining the essence of life through pollution and the exploitation of natural resources.

MH: That brings me to my final question, regarding those coalitions and the horizon of struggles today. What does it mean to win? My experience and the research we've done with the Radical Imagination Project has revealed a lot of different approaches to Indigenous and non-Indigenous solidarity, but often the potential or vision seems hazy. If we want to overcome the neoliberal death-system, does that look like all of us building some kind of common future together through shared governance? On the other hand, there are Indigenous activists who are thinking more in terms of parallel sovereign systems, that settlers will have their governance, Indigenous people will have their governance, and they'll have to come together on some level. Or, is it about creating some kind of shared umbrella of common governance? Or can we even answer those questions?

SP: It's a very difficult question. Sometimes we get caught up in our struggles with a linguistic problem in terms of what terminology to use. Sometimes I wonder about using terms like sovereignty, and a lot of times I find that, even with the best-intentioned alliances and coalitions, you start talking about ownership.

And again, this is where we need to explore our relational understandings: what does it mean to own something? It's a very difficult problem. I'm not saying it's impossible.

I'm having trouble with the idea of parallel governance, or coexistence. For my little community for instance, that's impossible. If you were to take a closer look at it, we're not all Indigenous. There are a lot of intertribal, inter-racial relationships. At what point do you cross, do you inter-communicate?

We're locked in the same notion as before: there's the commons, and then there's private property. But if you start looking at the relations, there would be another notion of the different nations living side-by-side. If you look at a city like Toronto you can see a lot of communities and peoples living side-by-side. But I think we have to explore those relational understandings before we can even start creating that.

I was talking to a colleague of mine about a problem that I've always had with terms like colonialism, post-colonialism, decolonization, anti-colonialism: what does that all mean? And what are you decolonizing towards? In post-colonialism, what constituted "post" and so forth? I'm working it out, but I really, firmly believe that we still need to decolonize to get to the space

that we can create or recreate an alternative. And I'm not sure if we can create that alternative while we're still colonized.

I look at the treaties, and at the different interpretations of those treaties. Obviously it's the Canadian legal interpretation that dominates, but if you look at some of this work that's being done that examines what the original Indigenous signatories thought about those treaties you see that, again, it comes to this relational understanding. So to renew those treaties we need to renew those relational understandings, and I think that's what we have to figure out: at what point do we come together? Or do you make a utopian group living over here, and another group living over there, and you never come together? I think that's impossible. I know that some of the more resurgent, militant Indigenous thinkers would probably think differently.

But let me put it this way: I used to ask the Chiefs what would happen if the government, all of the sudden, said to us "all right you have your treaty rights. You can implement them." What would that mean? And I think the harsh reality about the Marshall Decision was that we did not have a concrete alternative. Again, there were misunderstandings about what we were even trying to achieve with that court case. They always say: be careful of what you ask for, you'll get it. And if you get it, then what do you do, you know? A typical example was with the New Democratic Party government we had here in Nova Scotia. I don't think they knew what to do, and they took ill advice, and the neoliberals got in.

When you win, be prepared to win. I think this is why radical imagination is so important. You need those spaces to create something you're prepared to step in with. If not, the powers-that-be will find a way to undermine your victory.

Notes

1. "Netuklimuk [is a] concept central to Mi'kmaq culture and worldview that 'every living and non-living object was created equally, including humans. Everything in life in inter-connected. To sustain life in a respectful manner, lives must be lived responsibly and with consideration'" (230). Martha Stiegman and Sherry Pictou, "How Do You Say Netuklimuk in English? Learning through Video in Bear River First Nation," in *Learning from the Ground up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production*, ed. Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 227–242.

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