Navigating Professional Reconciliation: A Systems Theory Approach to Decolonizing the Workplace

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Dedication

The publication date, September 30, 2023, was deliberately chosen, serving as both a commemorative gesture and a call to action. This date is not merely a temporal marker but an homage to my great-grandmother, Lucy Bruneau who was subjected to the oppressive conditions of the residential school system.

Her early passing, a direct result of the Canadian colonial system and the traumas she endured, serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for decolonization.
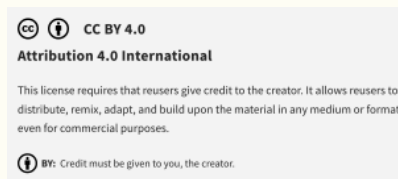
Prologue

This work-in-progress guidebook serves as more than just a manual; it acts as a corrective lens for the performative optics that too often dominate the discourse surrounding Indigenous issues, particularly every year on September 30th. For me, this date has consistently been marred by acts that can only be described as a "circus sideshow," where the true objectives of decolonization are eclipsed by the spectacle of photo-ops in orange shirts. These activities, while perhaps well-intentioned, are egregious in their trivialization of the profound pain and suffering experienced by Indigenous communities like my own. The guidebook is therefore designed to recalibrate our collective focus, redirecting it from superficial gestures to substantive actions that can instigate actual change.

For this reason, the guidebook has a dual purpose. On one hand, it aims to guide settlers along a structured path towards meaningful contributions to decolonization. On the other hand, it stands as a tribute to my great-grandmother and to the countless Indigenous individuals, families, and communities who have endured immense suffering under the weight of colonial structures. By providing this guidebook, I hope to minimize the recurring gaffes that make this specific date a moment of collective pain for Indigenous people. The aim is to replace ignorance with knowledge, tokenism with authentic action, and performative gestures with committed steps towards decolonization.

Understanding reconciliation as an ongoing process rather than a finite goal is crucial in the professional context. It requires structural changes and constant vigilance. Systems theory, with its focus on interrelationships and feedback loops, offers a robust framework for engaging with the complexities of decolonization and reconciliation. The idea is not just to change one part of the system (e.g., hiring more Indigenous people) but to alter the system's very logic, which often invisibly perpetuates colonial practices.

Start by conducting a comprehensive audit of the colonial frameworks and practices that are ingrained in your profession. Examine policies, workplace culture, decision-making processes, and even the metrics by which success is measured. Once you have a detailed understanding, strategize how to dismantle or revise these components in a way that aligns with the principles of reconciliation, such as those laid out in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action.

Remember, reconciliation is not a task to be checked off but a complex, ongoing interplay of actions and transformations, best navigated through a systems theory lens. By understanding the profession as a system that can either perpetuate or redress colonial harms, one can take wholistic and sustained actions. Terms like "reconcili-ACTION" or "REAL-conciliation" gain true meaning only when they translate into systemic changes that disrupt colonial legacies and foster equitable environments for Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals alike.

I prefer to use the term "wholistic" instead of "holistic" when describing knowledge systems because it better reflects the essence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as a whole. The term "holistic" is derived from Euro-centric language and carries connotations of being empty or lacking. Furthermore, it is associated with the word "holy" in religious contexts, which does not resonate with my Indigenous perspective. By using the term "wholistic," I emphasize the interconnectedness and completeness of Indigenous knowledge, acknowledging its integrity and wholistic nature. This idea was originally conceived by Dr. Kathy Absolon in her scholarly work, 'Indigenous Wholistic Theory: A Knowledge Set for Practice'.

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Systems Theory [Eurocentric] but it's ok

What is a 'Eurocentric' Systems Theory?

In designating a widely accepted systems theory as 'Eurocentric,' I am engaging in a specific form of epistemic action, especially as it pertains to challenging Canadian colonialism. While I don't find the theory itself to be inherently biased, the act of naming it 'Eurocentric' serves as a counter-move in the larger politics of naming and categorization. This is particularly important in contexts where Indigenous identities and epistemologies are consistently named and classified by external, often colonial, systems.

For me, naming this 'universal' theory as 'Eurocentric' is a way to reverse the lens and participate in the dialogical process of categorization. This is usually a unidirectional process, where Indigenous communities find themselves continuously being the subject of naming and classification. In this case, by labeling the theory as 'Eurocentric,' I exercise my epistemic agency. It becomes an act within the politics of recognition, aimed at fostering a more dialogical and reciprocal epistemic environment. This is my strategy for contributing to the dismantling of colonial structures in Canada while utilizing multiple systems theories.

Systems Theory [Eurocentric]

It is a transdisciplinary approach that seeks to understand systems—defined as wholes comprised of interconnected parts—in a comprehensive manner. It originates from several intellectual traditions and is not confined to a single discipline. In that sense, systemic theory can be both a theory and a framework, depending on its application and the level of abstraction involved.

Systems theory has its roots in several fields, including biology, engineering, psychology, and cybernetics among others.

Key figures include Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who is often credited with formulating General Systems Theory in the mid-20th century as a reaction against reductionism in science. In parallel, Norbert Wiener's work in cybernetics also contributed significantly to systems thinking, especially in understanding feedback loops and self-regulating systems.

As a Theory: In specific applications like ecological models, family therapy, or organizational theory, a systems theory serves as a hypothesis-driven, explanatory paradigm that helps predict outcomes. Here, it functions as a "theory" in the scientific sense.

As a Framework: In a broader, more philosophical context, a systems theory acts as a heuristic framework that guides inquiry across diverse domains. In this capacity, it doesn't necessarily offer specific hypotheses to test but provides an overarching lens through which to view and analyze complexity.

As a Meta-Theory: At an even higher level of abstraction, a systems theory can be seen as a meta-theory—a theory about theories—that provides the epistemological groundwork for understanding the interrelatedness of various theoretical constructs across different domains.

Systems Theory and Its Applications to Colonial Structures

Systems theory offers a compelling analytical framework for the study of complex arrangements, especially colonial structures. It provides tools to understand how various components within a system interact, both linearly and non-linearly, and how they respond to feedback. Below are key perspectives from systems theory applied to colonial structures.

Colonial Structures as Systems

Systems theory teaches us to see colonial structures as wholistic entities with multiple interacting components such as laws, economic factors, cultural norms, and racial ideologies. These components do not operate in isolation; rather, they influence and reinforce each other, creating a synergistic effect that perpetuates the systemic nature of colonization.

Feedback Loops and Colonial Perpetuation

In systems theory, feedback loops describe how the output of a system can serve as input, affecting future operations. In colonial contexts, these could be seen in the way oppressive policies generate social and economic disadvantages for Indigenous populations, which in turn justify further policies of marginalization.

Homeostasis and Resistance to Change

Colonial systems exhibit a tendency towards homeostasis—the ability to maintain internal stability. When subjected to efforts aimed at decolonization, such as legal reforms or social movements, colonial systems often employ adaptive strategies to maintain the status quo. For example, in the context of Canadian common law, legal interpretations may evolve to recognize certain Indigenous rights, but often in a way that keeps the underlying colonial power structures intact.

Core Principles of a Eurocentric Systems Theory

Wholism: Understanding the system as more than the sum of its parts.

Interconnectedness: All components within a system are linked in a network of relationships.

Emergence: New properties may arise at the level of the whole system that is not evident when examining individual components.

Feedback Loops: Systems are often characterized by cycles where the output feeds back into the system as an input, leading to self-regulation or instability.

Applications: Systems theory is employed across various fields, from biology (e.g., ecosystem analysis), to engineering (e.g., systems engineering), to social sciences (e.g., systems sociology), to philosophy and even to financial systems.

Indigenous Systems Theory: a new way

The Medicine Wheel

The Medicine Wheel originates across many Indigenous nations. While its meaning can vary, it is broadly used to represent wholistic thinking and interconnectedness.

The Medicine Wheel typically consists of a circle divided into four quadrants, often corresponding to the four cardinal directions: North, South, East, and West. These quadrants symbolize different aspects of existence, such as the four stages of life (childhood, youth, adulthood, and elderhood), or the four dimensions of well-being (physical, emotional, mental, and sacred).

It is my belief, from personally visiting the medicine wheels imbedded in the land near where I live, that the framework of the medicine wheel is an Indigenous systems theory. So I am creating it through the English written word in this guidebook for you to see how it works.

Figure 1: Aerial view of the Majorville Medicine Wheel (Courtesy of Alberta Environment and Parks)

The Medicine Wheel Systems Theory

1. Quadrants as Subsystems: Much like in systems theory where a system is comprised of interacting subsystems, each quadrant of the Medicine Wheel could represent a distinct subsystem. For example, in a social system, these could be governance, economy, culture, and environment.

2.Cyclicality and Feedback Loops: The Medicine Wheel emphasizes cycles and interconnectedness, concepts that align well with feedback loops in systems theory. Actions or changes in one quadrant should be understood as having ripple effects on the others, either amplifying (positive feedback) or balancing (negative feedback) systemic effects.

3. Wholism and Balance: The Medicine Wheel stresses the importance of balance among its quadrants. Similarly, systems theory calls for an understanding of how parts contribute to the balance or imbalance of the whole system. In the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory, the goal would be to achieve or maintain balance, necessitating interventions that consider the system's totality rather than isolated components.

4. Cultural and Contextual Adaptability: Eurocentric systems theory often assumes a universal applicability that can overlook cultural nuances. The Medicine Wheel Systems Theory would be adaptable to the cultural and historical context in which it is applied, allowing for more culturally sensitive and relevant systems analysis.

5. Ethics and Sacredness: One significant addition to systems thinking would be the explicit incorporation of ethical and sacred considerations. In Indigenous contexts, decision-making involves not just utilitarian assessments but also ethical and sacred dimensions. This adds a layer of complexity often missing from conventional systems theories.

6. Time and Generational Thinking: Unlike some Eurocentric constructs that view time linearly, many Indigenous cultures see time as cyclical. This perspective, incorporated into the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory, encourages long-term and generational thinking, essential for sustainability and justice.

Applying the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory could offer a more integrated, wholistic approach to understanding complex problems in the colonial system of Canada - from social and ecological sustainability to governance and health. It not only bridges Eurocentric and Indigenous ways of knowing but enriches our understanding of systems by adding layers of cultural, ethical, and spiritual complexity.
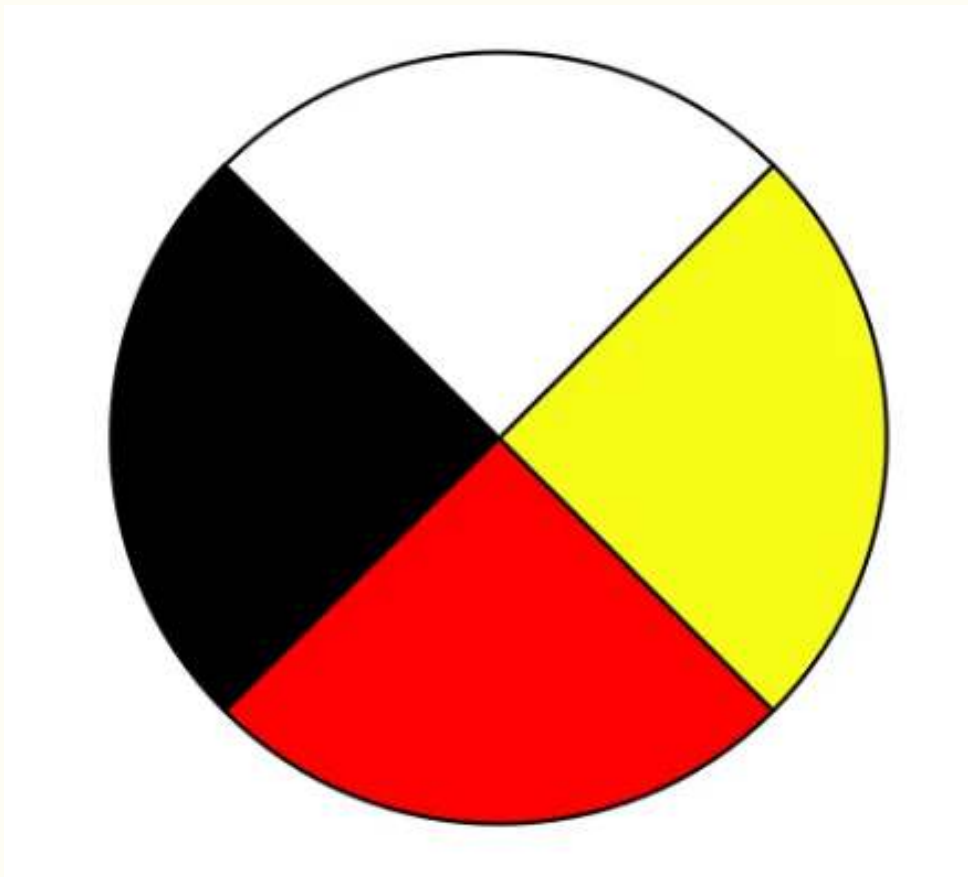
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Why are Systems Theories Important? Because Colonialism, that's why

Colonization as a System

Understanding that Canada operates as a colonial system is imperative for gaining analytical clarity on the complex webs of influence and power that structure various aspects of our personal and professional lives, from governance to individual decision-making. By approaching issues from a systems lens, it becomes possible to dissect the multi-layered components and impacts of colonization. These layers coalesce to form a system that perpetuates colonial relationships, both overtly and subtly, affecting how we work, think, and make decisions within this context.

The application of systems theory provides an insightful framework for navigating this complexity. Originating from the study of intricate, interdependent networks, systems theory allows us to capture the emergent properties and feedback loops that characterize colonial systems. This is especially valuable in Indigenous contexts, where colonization has not just been a matter of land dispossession but also involves intricate dynamics of cultural erasure, epistemicide, and structural inequalities. The framework facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how colonization perpetuates itself through interconnected social, legal, educational, health, justice, and political mechanisms.

By merging the analytical scope of systems theory with the study of Canada as a colonial entity, we can attain a more refined understanding of the longstanding and ongoing impacts of colonization. This approach equips scholars, policymakers, and community leaders with the conceptual tools needed to identify and challenge the systemic forces perpetuating colonial relationships. Moreover, it serves as a foundational step towards initiating meaningful dialogues for reconciliation and decolonization, particularly within your field of expertise.

Emergence in systems theory refers to the phenomenon where the collective behavior of individual system components results in outcomes that are unpredictable based on the components alone. In the colonial setting, this can be observed in the way that economic, legal, and cultural factors collectively create conditions that are overwhelmingly disadvantageous to Indigenous peoples, even if no single component is solely responsible for the effect.

Colonization as a System Cont'd: Decentralized Control and Power Dynamics

Systems theory emphasizes that control in complex systems is often distributed rather than centralized. In Canada's colonial systems, this could mean that no single entity or policy is responsible for colonization; instead, it is perpetuated through a network of interconnected institutions, policies, and cultural practices.

In summary, systems theories can provide a robust framework for dissecting the complexities of colonial structures. It enables scholars and practitioners to examine the complex relationships and feedback mechanisms that make colonization an insidious system of power and control.

In general, by applying systems theory to decolonization and truth and reconciliation, we gain not just descriptive capabilities, but also prescriptive insights that can inform more effective strategies for long term, transformative change that can build deep roots and can maintain capacity.

Examples of the Medicine Wheel as a Systems Theory in Action

Applying the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory to the Context of Decolonization in Post Secondary Education

Quadrants as Subsystems
Within the post-secondary educational landscape, we can apply the four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory as subsystems:
1. Curriculum (Mental), 2. Institutional Policy (Physical), 3. Campus Culture (Emotional), and 4. Relationship to Indigenous Communities (Sacred).

Curriculum (Mental): Curriculum changes must go beyond token gestures like including Indigenous authors in reading lists. A wholistic reform would necessitate a decolonized pedagogy that incorporates Indigenous epistemologies, languages, and worldviews, affecting all disciplines and departments.

Institutional Policy (Physical): This pertains to tangible measures like hiring practices, resource allocation, and the presence of Indigenous spaces on campus. An anti-colonial policy framework would challenge systemic barriers that marginalize Indigenous faculty and students.

Campus Culture (Emotional): Emotional well-being is nurtured through a supportive and inclusive campus culture. Indigenous students often face overt and covert forms of racism and exclusion. Hence, efforts must be made to educate the campus community about implicit biases, cultural appropriation, and the historical context of colonization.

Relationship to Indigenous Communities (Sacred): This speaks to the ethical and spiritual responsibilities educational institutions have towards Indigenous communities, such as respecting treaties, acknowledging territorial rights, and engaging in meaningful partnerships for knowledge exchange and community-based research.

Cyclicality and Feedback Loops
Any change in one quadrant would necessitate adjustments in others. For example, revising curriculum would require corresponding changes in faculty development (Institutional Policy) and would ideally contribute to a more inclusive Campus Culture. Similarly, a strong Relationship to Indigenous Communities could guide and inform all other subsystems.

Wholism and Balance The ultimate goal is to achieve balance among these subsystems, enabling a transformative educational experience that is respectful and inclusive of Indigenous students and faculties. Importantly, balance in this context would not mean a mere absence of conflict but a dynamic equilibrium w

Cultural and Contextual Adaptability This theory allows for customization according to the specific challenges and needs of each institution and the Indigenous communities they interact with.

Ethics and Sacredness: Ethical considerations regarding decolonization would be integral to the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory. Institutions should have an ethical responsibility toward truth, reconciliation, and justice. This should guide the ethics of research, community engagement, and pedagogy.

Time and Generational Thinking Long-term planning, beyond academic cycles or grant periods, is necessary to effect meaningful, sustained change. The cyclicality and long-term vision inherent in the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory allows for strategies that would benefit not just current students and faculty but future generations as well.

By applying the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory to the decolonization of post-secondary education, we can move beyond piecemeal reforms to more systemic transformations. This integrated, Indigenous, wholistic approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in decolonizing educational systems.

Applying Systems Theory [Eurocentric] to the TRC Calls to Action

Applying Systems Theory [Eurocentric] to the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action

When applying the Eurocentric systems theory to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, one realizes the profundity with which the document tackles the complexities of colonialism—both historical and ongoing.

Systems theory encourages us to look at the Calls to Action not as isolated recommendations but as interrelated components of a larger framework aimed at decolonization and reconciliation.

For instance, Calls #1, #18, #27, #43, and #57 focus on disparate issues ranging from child welfare to education, and from the legal system to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples [UNDRIP]. However, when examined through a Eurocentric systems lens, the TRC Calls are seen as interconnected facets that collectively strive to address the deeply entrenched structures of colonialism and inequality. They underscore the necessity of a multifaceted approach to reconciliation that acknowledges the complex interplay of historical and current socio-political dynamics.

Furthermore, this systems-oriented perspective reveals the wholistic nature of the TRC's approach. It insists that for any reconciliation efforts to be meaningful, there must be a comprehensive understanding of colonialism's historical and ongoing impacts on Indigenous communities.

This is evidenced by the emphasis the Calls to Action place on education, law, and policy reform as well as cultural recognition and respect. Each of these areas is not an isolated entity but part of a larger systemic issue. Therefore, in aspiring to meet these Calls to Action, any attempts at reform or reconciliation must also adopt a systems approach that recognizes the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues at hand.

Applying Systems Theory [Eurocentric] to Decolonizing Post Secondary

Applying the Systems Theory [Eurocentric] to Decolonization in Post Secondary Education

In a systems approach, education is not just a sum of discrete elements—like curricula, faculty, students, or resources—but a complex, interrelated ecosystem that both shapes and is shaped by societal factors, including historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism. The traditional Eurocentric models of education have long been ingrained in the academic institutions; therefore, decolonization must be understood as a multi-faceted challenge that intersects with administrative policies, curricula, research methodologies, student services, and community engagement.

From a Eurocentric systems perspective, decolonization cannot be a mere tokenistic inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum. It calls for a fundamental transformation in how education is conceived, delivered, and evaluated. This involves questioning the core assumptions that drive academic practices:

What epistemologies are considered valid?
Whose history is told and from what perspective?
How does the institution engage with Indigenous communities and scholars?
Are Indigenous languages and methodologies incorporated into the academic discourse?

The systems approach acknowledges that these issues are interconnected. For instance, revising curricula to include Indigenous knowledge systems may necessitate faculty training, which in turn may require changes in hiring practices, which then circles back to institutional policies.

Therefore, Eurocentric systems theories allow for a wholistic view where all these components are understood to be interdependent, influencing and being influenced by each other, within the broader contexts of colonial history and contemporary social structures. By recognizing these complex relationships, society can better strategize for meaningful, sustained decolonization in post-secondary education.

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Conclusion

The journey towards decolonization and truth and reconciliation is a complex endeavour that can be approached through various systems frameworks or theories.

Whether one opts for the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory or the Eurocentric Systems Theory largely depends on one's comfort level and perhaps situational context. Each approach offers unique analytical tools for dissecting and combating the colonial structures deeply embedded within Canadian society. The key is to engage with a model that resonates with you, as the ultimate aim is learning how to decolonize.

Over time, as you delve into decolonization, truth, and reconciliation you may find that your perspective evolves. This flexibility is not only acceptable but encouraged. Decolonization is a dynamic process that requires adaptability and the willingness to be humble and mindful of what is at stake.

Regardless of your starting point, the journey itself is an educative experience, enriching your understanding of systemic inequities and equipping you with the intellectual resources to confront them effectively from now on.

In essence, both the Medicine Wheel Systems Theory and Eurocentric Systems Theory serve as potential launching pads for your decolonization journey. The primary objective here is to equip you with the conceptual tools you need to initiate a meaningful process of decolonization and reconciliation. Therefore, the selection of your initial framework should be viewed as just that—an initial step in a deeply rewarding journey ahead that will alleviate systemic and deeply imbedded colonial harm that is inflicted upon Indigenous peoples daily.

About the Author:

Andrea Menard LLB, LLM (DR) PhD student, she/they/Δ·ᑉᐸ·° wiyawâw, is Métis from the abolished Red River Settlement on Treaty 1 (Métis family names are: Bruneau, Carrière, Landry, Guerin, LaRocque, and Champagne). She is a 'white-coded' Indigenous person, and a Métis Nation of Alberta citizen. She is the 'Top 5 Most Influential Lawyers of 2023' for CIO Times, and also 'Top 25 Most Influential Lawyers of 2022' for Canadian Lawyer Magazine.

Menard wears many hats – in her academic role as Lead Educational Developer, Indigenizing Curricula and Pedagogies, cross-appointed with the Centre for Teaching and Learning and Office of the Vice Provost, Indigenous Programming and Research at the University of Alberta, she is entrusted with the critical task of transforming and Indigenizing academic spaces by applying Indigenous ethics, teachings, practises and laws.

Drawing from over 25 years of direct experience working with Indigenous Nations across Treaties 4, 6, 7, 8, and 10, the Métis Nation of Alberta, the Métis Settlements, the T'exelc Nation, and the Northern Secwēpemc te Qelmūcw on unceded lands in British Columbia, as well as her own lived experiences as a Métis person living between the Indigenous world and the settler world, she guides professionals towards how to build relationships with local Indigenous communities and how to Indigenize and decolonize structures that currently uphold inequitable systems.

As an instructor at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Law, she expertly crafted the groundbreaking course "Reconciliation and Lawyers" (LAW 693). Additionally, she holds a faculty position at Osgoode Hall Law School, where she co-teaches alongside academic partner Marc Bhalla, "In Search of Reconciliation Through Dispute Resolution" (ALDR 6305). She also teaches, "Indigenous and Human Rights" (NS 404/504) at the University of Alberta, Faculty of Native Studies.

Andrea is a co-founder and co-chair of the Indigenous Lawyers' Forum, which recognizes the importance of supporting the next generation of legal professionals. The forum is dedicated to providing mentorship, support, and knowledge among Indigenous law colleagues, newly graduated law professionals, and current law students through monthly 'Tea & Bannock' sessions. Andrea is published, and also has a new book, 'Reflections on Allyship'. Find out more at: www.indigenousconnect.org

Andrea Menard with Treaty Bear at the University of Alberta [sculptor is Stewart Steinhauer] circa 2023.