

Rose-Eva (hosting): Hello and welcome to Unheard Youth Voices, a podcast created at Edmonton Centre for Race and Culture focusing on newcomer youth voices all across Canada. We are listening to what Canadian newcomer youth have to say about identity, migration, and belonging. I'm your host, Rose-Eva Forgues-Jenkins. In this episode, I sit down with Nêhiyaw language instructor, Reuben Quinn. Reuben talks about his work with teaching an Indigenous language. We also chat about the relationship between Indigenous people and the rest of Canada. We talk about the history of that relationship and where it stands today. I wanted to include this conversation in the podcast because the topic of Indigenous and newcomer relations came up often in the discussions that newcomer youth were having. I also think that when we're discussing the topics of identity, migration, and belonging within a Canadian context, an Indigenous perspective is necessary and important. I wanted to make a note that this is a conversation on Indigenous and newcomer relationships. Reuben is from the Nêhiyaw nation but there are over 600 different First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities all over Canada. Each of these communities have their own perspective and stories when it comes to Indigenous and newcomer relationships. I'm very grateful that Reuben allowed me to sit down with him and chat with him about his point of view. In the first part of the conversation, Reuben introduces himself and his story. Without further ado, here is Reuben Quinn

Reuben Quinn (to Rose-Eva): *[Nêhiyaw language]*

So, I'm glad to be here. My name is Reuben Quinn, I come from Treaty Six territory. My grandfather had land on the south side and through some situations and circumstances, they lost that land to the people of Fort Edmonton and so my grandfather moved from the south side of Edmonton. He went to St-Paul-de-Métis they called it at one time and so he was there for a bit, and then he went on to Kikino Métis settlement and then this last part of his journey he moved to Elinor Lake which is where he is buried now. He was a signateur to the Adhesion to Treaty Six. So, I come from Saddle Lake and my grandmother had moved to Enoch and then from Enoch my grandfather, my dad's dad, went to Saddle Lake. That's where I was born. I was born in St. Paul actually. I was the first in my family to be born in the hospital. My older brothers and sisters were born at home. And my younger sister and I were born in the hospital in St. Paul. So, I'm – I live in Edmonton now and what I do is I pass on a writing system we call Nêhiyaw atahkipeyîhkanah. Atahk is a spirit so we call those celestial bodies in the sky, we call them atahk, spirits, and each of us has a atahk, a spirit. And those writings that I pass on that were given to us we call them atahkipeyîhkanah, spirit markers. So that system was given to us in 1971 when we were liberated from residential schools. They call them schools but they were actually factories for warehousing people. Very few people, early on anyways, were allowed to go past Grade Nine unless they were going to go into a seminary. That rule changed. It was a law actually and that changed in 1951. So, in 1971, twenty years later, the Oblates left the – nuns and the priests left Blue Quills and they decided the people from the nearby reservations there, decided to bring education to the youth, us. And so they went and did some research and went and got this writing system which had been underground for probably over – about a hundred years. And so, that's the system that I teach in Edmonton now. And it's going very well. It helps to – it helps with the brain. It helps also to connect – connect with the land. The language I speak is connected to the land here. One of the things that colonialism has done for my people, Nêhiyaw and all Turtle Islanders, I call them, the different nations, is colonialism has disconnected us from our culture and what the culture is, to simplify it, is the four "D"s: dance,

dialect, dress, and diet. We've been disconnected from that. There was a really tremendous push to eliminate our languages and our ways of life, our systems. Especially our system of belief. And it was very successful by the colonial powers. It benefited the colonizers a great deal to bring forth policies and make our ways illegal to speak the language, to live in our faithful ways, the different ceremonies that we have. So, I talk about that when I'm teaching – passing on the language. Of course, I am not a fluent speaker. I'm semi-fluent. I know enough just to pass on the system. And then I try to get people to learn more about the language. Which usually the best place for that is in ceremony because that's where they talk the Nêhiyaw language. Anyways, I guess I'm quite old, I'm 59 years old, I'm just starting to learn quite a bit on uncovering a lot of things that were not available to us because of policies and fear.

Rose-Eva (hosting): For the next section of this episode on Newcomer and Indigenous Relationships, I wanted to learn more about what Reuben's Nêhiyaw language lessons were like. Reuben was very generous and allowed me to sit in on and record one of his introductory lessons. Here is Reuben talking to his class about the Nêhiyaw language system and culture.

Reuben (to class):

In 1971, these four females went to a man in Goodfish Lake. His name was -----, to get the writing system from that man, the system I'm going to show you. It had gone underground for about a hundred years it was underground, and they went to this man and he was able to pass down the writing system to them, these four females. And along the way, there were also people that were doing research on our societies and our nations. And one thing that they discovered was that as far as politics and organization was concerned, we had a schematic hierarchy whereby there were what they called [*Nêhiyaw language*] is the undisputed leaders and then there were blanket people, [*Nêhiyaw language*] then there were revered and respected elders and then there were ceremony people, in that order. And who kept all of that intact, there was a group of people called [*Nêhiyaw language*] revered and respected females. They had their – a responsibility and that – those responsibilities weren't limited to these two things I'm going to talk about. And one of the responsibilities was to look after medicines like a pharmacy, I guess. And the other responsibility was also to take care of the language. So, the nations were able to flourish to such an extent that they had a great range and domain over this continent. The Nêhiyaw language goes from the interior British Columbia all the way across this land into the United States to the East coast, all along the Eastern seaboard, down into Florida. There are people also who went to South America and had – would have links to the language, their language system there, one example is the word we use for fire [*Nêhiyaw language*] they have the same word in South America. So, these females, they had a great, great responsibility. There were 600,000 words in the Nêhiyaw language prior to European contact. Today, the Canadian government will make a claim that we have about 30,000 words. So that's over half a million words that we've lost. And when we were in contact with the European colonizers, what they did, was they set out to terminate our systems. In 1951, legislation was overturned that forbade Indigenous people from practicing our language and our culture. So, one of the things that started coming back were the idea of [*Nêhiyaw language*]. They had a really important function in our community. And when our communities were operating according to those standards that had been passed down everything went well, so I often say everything will get back to balance once we put the women back in their place. And where is that place, but that position of authority and

power, decision-making, because we come from a matriarchal society and this patriarchy set out to eliminate our ways and those ways worked since time immemorial.

Rose-Eva (hosting): You just heard a small sample of what it's like to be in one of Reuben Quinn's Nêhiyaw language classes that are given at the Centre for Race and Culture. Now, we go back to my conversation with Reuben and talk about the history of newcomer and Indigenous relationships.

Rose-Eva (to Reuben): And so, I was wondering if you could speak specifically about your work and your experiences with newcomers to Canada?

Reuben: Well, here is my experience from newcomers in Canada. Canada was – was built on racism. It was built on the idea of genocide. In the 16th century, there were people that saw that there was an opportunity to get resources from a different land. The resources in Europe were dwindling. So they came here. And then in Europe, they had a class system. There were the elite, the upper class, the upper middle class, the middle class, the lower middle class, the lower class, and then of course, what they called the dregs of humanity, the really low class. I guess, kind of like how people view people that are Europeans that live in trailer courts nowadays that that class of people. And this was created by those people in the upper echelon. And those people in the upper echelon had a great disdain for the lower classes. They would never invite them to break bread with them at the dinner table. It was unheard of to do that. So, *Oliver Twist* and all of those other stories, they're nice but they're far from reality. So, when these people found that there were resources here, they started infiltrating the other classes of people. The upper echelon found out that there was lots of land to be had here, so they actively set out to find people that would come over here. They started to tell them, listen, we have land over here. You just have to go take it. There are savages living there. And their pitch was, listen, those people they don't use that land and you – you're white like us. So, now the lower classes felt like they were being included. Very good propaganda, actually, but the lower classes were also taught to have a disdain for Indigenous people here. That carried over into my experience in 1960s when you go into town, I would have to wait in what was called a livery stable, little Indigenous children weren't welcome in the shops and the stores. And then, in 1967, in the town of *St. Paul* they built the world's first flying saucer landing pad to welcome all the aliens from all across the universe. They wanted the people from the surrounding Indigenous communities to come into their town, spend their money, but leave. Leave as quickly as possible. So, my experience with newcomers has been that there's a great disdain from them towards my people. When I go and welcome newcomers, I try to learn their language. For instance, [*Somalian language*] is a greeting in Somalia and that has not been reciprocated as often as I would like. The newcomers don't come to me and say, hey, how do you say this word or what can I do, you know, what do you want to be known as? I understand you're not Cree. See, we're given the label "Cree" by Europeans. I'm not a Cree. I'm actually a Nêhiyaw. Cree is someone, a name that someone else gave me. Another body of people labeled me Cree. And so, I call myself Nêhiyaw. So when I'm looking towards newcomers from way back, tried to learn ways to help those people come and be comfortable on this land. The Filipinos, for instance, they have a wonderful language. And I don't know the original way of greeting but now they use [*Filipino language*] because I believe they've been colonized as well by several different groups of peoples. Different nations. What I like to do is if we can have an understanding, these newcomers coming to this land, they have an

understanding of how the people are here. You'll see my people walking around and some of them aren't doing too well, maybe drinking alcohol, so those are the people that you immediately get exposed to, and it reinforces those stereotypes that are given to newcomers. But there are people from the other 80 – 85 percent of the people are actually being productive as far as providing for their families is concerned, but those aren't the ones we see. The ones we see are downtown pushing Safeway carts and it's kind of – it's really sad when I see my brothers and sisters pushing Safeway carts. I always think, that person should be driving a Lexus, that person should be driving a Cadillac. And I look at somebody else, and I think, oh, that person should be driving a Pontiac Sunfire. Well, anyways, nonetheless, there's Indigenous people here who are marginalized and we've been given a system where we've been trained to be a certain way by organizations and institutions. And because of systemic racism, there's of course uh my people have been criminalized. You go anywhere in the world where there has been colonization, the Indigenous population is usually the most criminalized and the colonizers very intelligent people, will find ways to criminalize. So, what I would like to do, my personal experience with newcomers is that I try to learn a little bit about them. I know there's a lot of hardships that they came from.

Rose-Eva: I thought it was really interesting when you were talking about how colonialism has affected all sorts of people all over the world. An article that I found really interesting was published in the CBC in 2015, around the time when Canada was receiving a lot of Syrian refugees. And the article was entitled, "Will Canadians be as Generous to First Nations as they are to Syrian Refugees?" So there's someone who was from Kenya and so Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963 when the effects of colonization were still present. I'm sure they're still present now. And a quote from him is that he said, "We are people of the same life, people of the same culture, we have gone through the same colonial experience. We have more things in common than divide us and it's better to know an Indigenous person to live next to them than to stay away from them." Is that something that you agree with?

Reuben: Absolutely. As long as we know that there's clear boundaries. When the Treaty of Niagara was being negotiated, the Europeans were small in number. Very small in number and the Indigenous people were great, so they – a treaty was made and – and it was the Europeans who sought this treaty who wanted a place to live and so the Indigenous people, from what I understand, helped them through the first few winters and – and helped them with food. But in the Treaty of Niagara, both the European nations and the Indigenous people, nations, would ride in their own canoes alongside each other. And what that symbolizes is that the Europeans would live by their own laws, the Indigenous people would live by our own laws, and if there were infractions made uh laws broken, our people would deal with the offender. The Europeans, same thing, and then what the Europeans said at the time was that, we would bring our own food, you don't have to worry about. So they brought in European cows, pigs, and chickens and other animals, oxen, I think, were in there, and those original people only wanted six inches of topsoil to grow crops. So that was agreed upon. Over time, what happened was the Europeans knew that in order to conquer the people of this land, they needed to get rid of the food source, so they systematically eliminated the food sources from this land. The most dramatic of that of course, was the elimination of the buffalo that there were four great herds here on Turtle Island from south America to way up north in Northwest Territories, there were four great herds and numbering in the hundreds of millions. By 1885, Europeans and others including Indigenous

people, had hunted the buffalo to near extinction. There were 500 left in the middle of Montana by 1885. So, our food source was destroyed and so – and then, as well, throughout this time, the Europeans were gaining numbers. They were getting greater numbers and the European cows were propagating. The pigs and chickens. So, our positions reversed and European Canadians took good advantage of this. So, when people are talking about getting together, I think it's important that a mutual respect be first and foremost as far as understanding each other's ways of life uh respecting boundaries, and respecting each other's belief systems. I think that's important to also be open to – to learning about the others, the other ways, so that they have a broadened and enlarge that perspective so that the ignorance isn't that much of an issue.

Rose-Eva: Hmmm. How do you see newcomer and Indigenous relations going in the future?

Reuben: If we have to lower our defenses where newcomers are taught that they have to be alert when it comes to dealing with Indigenous people, they have to be wary of us, and once if we can get rid of that mentality and realize we all bleed red, we all have a similar DNA, we're all one race and that's the human race. So, once we get to that realization, then we can look at each other's cultures and see what we like about each other and how we can be helpful with one another. Or else, just leave each other alone, is another way, as well. Like, I wouldn't go and live with the Hutterites, who are very, very independent, but I wouldn't go live with them. I love their ways. I support them and I think to support each other and give each other encouragement of our separate ways and where we could come together. Celebrate, rejoice.

Rose-Eva: One last question, I think, just to have a nice summary. Let's say there's a house next to yours and it goes for sale. And a Somalian family moves in there. What would you want them to know about you?

Reuben: I'd probably have a cup of tea with them and start talking to them about the history. And then start talking to them about how circumstances borne out of racism and genocidal policies has brought us to where we are now. And then I would make sure that they had the facts. Because I can go on and create a lot of embellishments and that wouldn't help anybody. Sticking to the facts. So, I would tell these newcomers about the systems that created the psyche that a lot of my people have nowadays and about the treaties and how they were broken and only used to benefit Europeans. And where we're at now as because of our indomitable spirit and our resilience as people, we go back and connect with our ways, our cultural ways and realize, hey, this really is good stuff here, what the ancestors were trying to leave with us, our world view that everything is spirit. And love comes from the fourth dimension. That's the only way.

Rose-Eva: That concludes this episode of the Unheard Youth Podcast. Thank you for listening to this episode entitled Newcomer and Indigenous Relationships. A huge thank you to Reuben Quinn for being my guest on the podcast and allowing me to record part of his lesson. I think that sitting in on this lesson allowed me to think more deeply about the important role of language when it comes to preserving and experiencing a culture. There are a huge number of Indigenous people who have been disconnected from their own language. I am very privileged to be allowed to get a small glimpse of what language revitalization can look like. A very big thank you to Reuben Quinn and his class as well, for allowing me to record in this important space. We would also like to thank our friends and partners at CJSR 88.5 FM and the Edmonton Community

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