

## ***Animating Sites of Postcolonial Education: Indigenous Knowledge and the Humanities***

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**Prologue:** *Wela'liq. I thank the Anishnabe/Assiniboine people on whose territory I have been invited to speak. I also recognize the Cree and Métis whose long relationship has been with the land in this place. Wela'liq. I also thank the organizers and planners of CSSE, for inviting me to bring my scholarship and research to this conference and also for making it possible for me to attend my son's graduation in Halifax by changing the time of the session. For all of you whose sessions were interrupted, I thank you for your patience.*

### **I. Introduction**

To begin, I would like to introduce the terms in my title. Most misunderstood is the term 'postcolonial', along with its companion terms of postmodern and post-structural. The 'post' is deceiving in that these terms seem to suggest a temporal condition. This is, in fact, not the case, but rather each of these terms are related to criticism that comes in response to theoretical underpinnings of disciplinary knowledge that has privileged some knowledge, societies, and cultures and have been used indiscriminately outside of the context and conditions and voices of people.

'Postcolonial' is not a time after colonialism, but rather for me it represents more an aspiration, a hope, not yet achieved. It constructs a strategy that responds to experience of colonization and imperialism. As a critique, it is about rethinking the conceptual, institutional, cultural, legal, and other boundaries that are taken for granted and assumed universal, but act as structural barriers to many, including Aboriginal people, women, visible minorities, and others. In these spaces, these groups are silenced societies in knowledge making, talking, and writing takes place but they are not heard in the production of knowledge because such knowledge is managed by others. The instruments of this hegemony and domination are cultivated in language, discourses, disciplinary knowledge, and institutional policy and practice.

Postcolonial is not only about the criticism and deconstruction of colonization and domination, but also about the reconstruction and transformation, operating as form of liberation from colonial imposition. But dismantling or effecting brutal oppression and domination are no easy targets, and as a result, can be overwhelming. So part of my aspiration is envisioning practices for transformation, acts of hope and finding light in the seeming darkness. Hence, my paper today is both the acknowledgement of the colonial system that has triggered Indigenous peoples' trauma and disconnection with many aspects of education and themselves and an articulation of aspirations for transformation and healing through education and in particular, through a newly understood Indigenous humanities. I offer some thoughts about how this transformation translates into constructing new relations, new frames of thinking and educational processes, not as mere products or 'wishful fictions,' but as processes that engage each of us to rethink our present work and research in and through the Indigenous humanities.

### **II. Indigenous Knowledge, Narratives, and Foundations**

Indigenous humanities are a fairly new academic conception, although it has long deep roots and traditions in Aboriginal nations. Since humanities have been linked with European traditions as the source and foundation for university knowledge, the idea of a humanities linked to Aboriginal people has not yet been fully explored. In each of the disciplinary traditions, colonial humanities have taken up aspects of Aboriginal knowledge in fragmented forms, such as in literature, art, philosophy, and history, but to bring these various aspects together has not been achieved. This is the new challenge

to bring Humpty Dumpty of Indigenous Humanities back together again.

Little is understood about Indigenous traditional knowledge, although it has been increasingly used at international levels as foundations to sustainability of the environment or offered as an antidote to globalization. Indigenous knowledge has been foreground in ecology and in some other areas such as sciences, thanks to the work of Gregory Cajete, Oscar Kawagley, Ray Barnhardt, and others. Their interests are connected to the empirical and spiritual connections to the earth known among diverse peoples. They acknowledge Indigenous peoples throughout the world have practiced earth science and have discovered by their own methods important knowledge that enable them to live sustainably.

Recognizably, this dynamic knowledge is in jeopardy as Eurocentric frameworks continue to erode away at its linguistic and cultural diverse foundations (Harmon, 2000; Battiste & Henderson, 2000). However, as more and more Indigenous scholars bring their passion and research of their own nations to the academy, Indigenous knowledge is gradually finding more and more breathing space in the university and research scholarship. The fact that there are now over 100 Aboriginal doctorates across Canada having matriculated and over 100 Aboriginal doctoral students currently in doctoral programs, the information and research dealing with Aboriginal knowledge is accelerating. Yet this knowledge has far greater and expanding opportunities and today I would like to open the field to include Indigenous humanities as inclusive to Indigenous knowledge. I offer how these knowledge bases may merge with therapeutic methodologies and other educational content and methods. To understand what are some of the foundational values surrounding Indigenous peoples, I offer a narrative about a beginning, for "[e]very culture has its creation story, a narrative template that not only explains what the group considers significant but offers the foundational values for good living (Harmon, 2003).

At the 2004 Massey Lectures Series, Thomas King offered a story that suits well my purposes. It is a story about Falling Sky Woman, a story that has many of the same elements in many diverse Indigenous communities. Among the Mi'kmaq it starts with two young women wishing to be married and why to the stars. So they find themselves there upon awakening. Later Thomas King's story emerges. It is about a time, perhaps when beginnings evolve from wide and diverse relationships and not a singular interaction with God.

At this time a pregnant woman while looking for food digs deeply in the earth for the roots of a certain plant. Eventually the plant gives way and opens up to a dimension below the ground, from which she falls and soars toward the planet below that is covered with water. The animals who are floating and diving on that planet see her coming and after some collaboration, the water birds catch her fall and place her on the back of the flattest object, the turtle's back, while they decide what to do with her. She then asks them to find earth at the bottom of the water and each one attempts one by one to get to the bottom until one finally succeeds. Taking the mud, she smoothes this mud on the back of the turtle, making muddy land which eventually dries that serves as her home. After the birth of her twins, they transform the land and water into large diverse tracts of land, interspersed with waterways, mountains, deserts and seas. Finally, they learn to live together in harmony, dealing with both the challenges and diversity of life they have together.

Like many of the other stories of diverse Indigenous nations, Falling Sky Woman illustrates societal structures that are multi-layered, adaptable, changing, interdependent, with relations of animals and humans based on cooperation, collaboration, and respect for the unknown, and in which each have gifts and transforming powers embedded within each entity. These and other similar origin stories are among the Indigenous humanities that continue to offer multiple layers of lessons and teachings that inspire and enable peoples to find guidance for their daily lives. They represent the living and patterned, habitual, and ceremonial relationship in performance with the land and relationship building with others that become the source for Indigenous humanities.

This story tradition takes us to the foundations of the trauma among First Nations peoples in Canada. Unlike Falling Sky Woman who seeks out counsel with the other animals about how to live together cooperatively, the contact of Aboriginal peoples with European peoples had very different

relationships. In its early stages, the relationships were cooperative, with Europeans depending on the various nations to help them find sustenance, shelter, and advice about their way around the continent. Once these Europeans felt more comfortable, they resorted to the values and hierarchy of their own traditions and their own origins and forced the people they encountered into slavery and subjugation. This narrative has its variations depending on place. In Canada, without wars of conquest, the British crown negotiated treaties that would enable Europeans to create settlements and a respect for their own governing entity. Canada then became an imagined entity, built upon the lands of First Nations. In return for these opportunities and the safety of the terrain, European Canadians were to be expected to respect the relationships of the treaties, their promises for teachers and schools, medical help in the medicine chest and other services and respectful relationships, in return for their safety and their ability to create a home on these lands.

Clearly articulated in these negotiations, First Nations realized that they would need additional knowledge to harmonize their relationships with Europeans, and they negotiated for schools, teachers and knowledge that would enable them to develop bi-cognitive skills for their future. Treaty one and four reads as follows (Henderson, 1995):

*"Her Majesty agrees to maintain a school of each reserve hereby made whenever the Indians of the reserve should desire it."*

*"Her Majesty agrees to maintain a school in the reserve allotted to each Band as soon as they settle on said reserves and are prepared for a teacher."*

In the earliest treaties between the British Sovereign and First Nations in Atlantic Canada, it is evident that aboriginal families did not choose to transfer any part of their aboriginal education system to the Crown. They maintained education as a traditional (aboriginal) right and duty of the parents. They did not agree to send their children to non-Indian schools. They never delegated to the Crown any role in educating their people or children, but reserved that authority to themselves. While schools at first used the Indian languages and traded skills and knowledge for various forms of European domestic knowledge, eventually these cooperative relationships deteriorated into oppressive residential schools built on negative stereotypical mythic representations of Indians and Indian society and Eurocentric glorification, which damaged Aboriginal family socialization and their teachings. These schools broke relationships among the people with themselves, with their own guardian spirits, their parents and communities, as well as with the land and environment. This troubling legacy is still continuing to affect peoples' lives today, as it will continue through several more generations without significant change.

### **III. Failure of Education**

Federal government agreements made with the provinces to provide schools and other educational services violated treaty rights to education as the treaties were for schools to be built in their communities and for their purposes, not for assimilation. Despite the federal government's fiduciary duty to provide education that advanced the treaty relationship, the federal government has persistently passed on its duty to whomever wanted that task and have not taken seriously their own role in developing educational capacity. At the beginning of their enacted policies involving Indian education, federal government gave to churches responsibility for education of First Nations children, later they enlisted the provincial governments' schools, and then they agreed to allow First Nations educational authorities to provide administration of schools. While much money and work have been focused on First Nations education in the last century, contemporary schools have not corrected or confronted the lessons of the residential schools and the residual negative stereotypes of First Nations people.

In 1998, after RCAP report was accepted, the Government of Canada announced *Gathering Strength - Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*, which calls for a renewed partnership with Aboriginal people based on recognizing past mistakes and injustices, the advancement of reconciliation, healing and renewal, and the building of a joint plan for the future. The Government offered a Statement of Reconciliation, which acknowledged its role in the development and administration of residential schools. The

Government stated: .

Sadly, our history with respect to the treatment of Aboriginal people is not something in which we can take pride. Attitudes of racial and cultural superiority led to a suppression of Aboriginal culture and values. As a country, we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of Aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices. We must recognize the impact of these actions on the once self-sustaining nations that were disaggregated, disrupted, limited or even destroyed by the dispossession of traditional territory, by the relocation of Aboriginal people, and by some provisions of the Indian Act. We must acknowledge that the result of these actions was the erosion of the political, economic and social systems of Aboriginal people and nations. Against the backdrop of these historical legacies, it is a remarkable tribute to the strength and endurance of Aboriginal people that they have maintained their historic diversity and identity. The Government of Canada today formally expresses to all Aboriginal people in Canada our profound regret for past actions of the federal government, which have contributed to these difficult pages in the history of our relationship together.

One aspect of our relationship with Aboriginal people over this period that requires particular attention is the Residential School system. This system separated many children from their families and communities and prevented them from speaking their own languages and from learning about their heritage and cultures. In the worst cases, it left legacies of personal pain and distress that continue to reverberate in Aboriginal communities to this day. Tragically, some children were the victims of physical and sexual abuse.

The Government of Canada acknowledges the role it played in the development and administration of these schools. Particularly to those individuals who experienced the tragedy of sexual and physical abuse at residential schools, and who have carried this burden believing that in some way they must be responsible, we wish to emphasize that what you experienced was not your fault and should never have happened. To those of you who suffered this tragedy at residential schools, we are deeply sorry (Stewart, 1998 in Government of Canada)."

Most First Nations schools have comprehended what that has meant for their people. But approximately 68% of First Nations students are in provincial schools, and so provincial public educational systems must act on and recognize the tragic educational failure of residential schools and the effects it has on all peoples. The results of the federal government contracting out First Nations education have not surpassed the residential school achievements (Auditor General 2000; Tymchuk, 2001). In the year 2000, the Auditor General of Canada identified that First Nations students continue to achieve far below those of non-Aboriginals. First Nation graduates lag at least twenty-five years from parity with Canadian standards. Large gaps in academic achievement between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal classmates were also reported in Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta (Fraser Reports, including BC Report Card on Alberta's Elementary Education and Report Card on Quebec's Secondary Schools). Aptly noted by one of the Fraser Institute reports of 2004:

"The evidence shows that unless the bad news is made public, real improvement will be, at best sluggish. Full and public disclosure will provide much greater incentive for improvement" (Cowley & Easton, 2004; p.5).

Well into the last half of the last century, educational equity was the impetus for educational change, and provincial governments have begun to experiment with some program initiatives to improve the access and retention of First Nations students as well as review the curricula and textbooks for damaging stereotypes. In the 80's review of policy and some cultural programming, transitional English language assistance and professional work with teachers were implemented to help bridge cultural gaps. Today, the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan continues to offer courses for preservice teachers education about diverse groups of disenfranchised peoples in Canada. While there is no longer focusing on mere cultural differences (an us/them binary), a

reflective examination of the values and beliefs among preservice teachers that foster prejudice, discrimination and racism in society is being pursued with some perceived success. Yet, how do teachers take this beyond the binaries and beyond the critique that is often met with resistance in public schools? We have found that teachers who attempt to bring forward the oppressive historical and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada through such courses as Native Studies and social studies find that breaking the silence of oppressions is fraught with pressures and emotional forces damaging to the lecturers themselves and to First Nations students. The resistance of white students who do not know this history counteract with guilt, anger, denial or racist justification for continued colonial privilege. In Native Studies history, as well as in courses such as antiracist education, teachers and professors find that Indian-white relations is constantly contested, and treaties thought irrelevant, a form of 'passive violence', making the work of Indigenous academics demanding, difficult, and embattling on all sides.

#### **IV. What can we do to make a change?**

How can curriculum, schools, teacher education, and universities be agents of post-colonial education? What therapeutic educational theory and pedagogy exists to create a healing initiative that not only helps communities and students cope and transform their relations and heal their self-concepts and build new foundations of strength? How do students and families create renewed self-esteem in the context of poverty, residential school psychological pain, forced assimilation, and increasing despair?

Without a doubt, many educators are seeking the means of effecting positive change to these questions. From New Zealand have come some international examples of inspiration where the Maori have transformed education, through directly effecting the active politicization of the parents in the education of their children. This created the Ko Hungeo Reo language nests and later the Kura Kaupapa Maori schools. Without taking the comparison too far, however, it is important to note that the comparative example of the education of the Maori and the context of education in Canada is different from the boarding schools in New Zealand which used Maori language and educated them in the British model. Here they did not.

Many Aboriginal educators are seeking higher education to help improve education with their own communities and draw on their own theory from their own languages and cultures and stories and knowledge. In their research is a focus on decolonizing strategies raising Indigenous voices, narratives and visions as foundational to change. New and on-going allies to this work have provided important work in antiracist, anti-oppressive emancipatory education. This journey cannot be achieved by Indigenous peoples alone but has to be collective collaborative work as SSHRC has come to understand in their more recent initiatives. These collaborations should also draw from the rich but neglected knowledge that is already available. This transformation does not come easily, as many Indigenous people recognize the damage that many researchers have inflicted on them and resist research that is appropriative and not beneficial to them. This has stimulated much work on research ethics among Indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999; Battiste & Henderson, 2000).

#### **V. Indigenous Humanities and Knowledge/Healing**

As a result of the persistent and compelling assimilation agenda, First Nations parents have damaged eroded connections with Elders and their relatives. Many are still living the confusion of Eurocentric ways of knowing where priorities are thrust elsewhere, rather than among First Nations communities' knowledge and ways of knowing. Elders speak to spiritual connections as the core, yet few understand what that means. These connections are the source of finding an ecological vision of Indigenous humanities, one's guardian spirits, and one's gifts in the context of a life journey. The journey of dysfunction is not just a life journey, but rather a challenge to all of us involved in education. This gap in education and the traumatic effects of schools must be addressed with an education that is therapeutic and nourishing. Each person's journey can be whole and satisfying with appropriate processes.

Decolonization is a source of deconstruction and reconstruction, and both are needed to help

address the current crises. Residential schools represent the epitome of the colonial system, destroying beliefs in the spirituality they needed to deal with the oppressive church personnel, and that would help them heal and assist them in their life journey. But Eurocentric education steeped in glorification of globalization, technology, and capitalism has not affected the needed support.

Education helps us to understand ourselves in the world and in relation to others. To understand humanity, one must accept intrinsic differences and diversity as a feature of a global community, but reject privileging as foundations of reward. "Realizing who we are allows us to acknowledge the legitimacy of other cultural systems (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p. 96). Eurocentric humanity has proved to be not about being a universal human and whole, healed and empowered, but is still located in social construction of superiority and dominance. Cognitive imperialism is a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values. Validated through one's knowledge base and empowered through public education, it has been the means by which whole groups of people have been denied existence and has been used further as the means of confiscating Aboriginal wealth among Aboriginal communities. Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity and maintains legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference.

As a result, cultural minorities and First Nations have been led to believe that their poverty and impotence is a result of their cultural and racial status and origins. The modern solution to their despair has been described in reports in logical analysis and causal entailment, with the overriding burden being placed upon their being a member of a cultural minority. The gifts of modernity have been the ideology of oppression of others, when in their grand narratives they locate problems and generalize and universalize without context. Such methods negate knowledge as a process of inquiry and change, but rather to change the consciousness of the oppressed, not change the situation, which oppressed them.

Education as a humanistic endeavor must then recognize and reconcile the dehumanizing history that Indigenous peoples have lived. Such an education can then lead to a new and transformed relationship. Developing an awareness of the socio-historical reality, facing the complicities that came with privileging, understanding these relationships to the present and taking action to correct misconceptions promoted as a result of colonization will begin a healing journey for all peoples. While Native Studies has been added to the Saskatchewan core of studies for aspiring preservice teachers, the courses are limited in their privileging of a history of Canadian laws, policies, and their effects in Aboriginal communities. Teachers need to discover in addition the Indigenous humanities, the languages, literacies, visual expressions and philosophical foundations of the Indigenous communities. Rather than be treated as a homogenous group, where Indians blend into First Nations and Aboriginal entities, having no cultural face, only a history of white political discourses and their consequential effects on Aboriginal people, they need to expand their repertoire of knowledge about Indigenous knowledge and the humanities.

Cultural discourses have been used to disguise the underlying theory of incapacity of Aboriginal students, and not on their capacity, that is on their Aboriginal identity, languages and cultures and communities. Rather culture as the additive element to the current curriculum suggests that Aboriginal students need a form of motivating connection to the current Eurocentric curriculum in order to be inspired and connected to the curriculum. On this level, cultural content is transitional, a bridging mechanism to support the core curriculum. It is not to support all students' learning of the diversities in their nation that must be respected, maintained or celebrated. Rather, cultural education has become the panacea of all inclusivities involving Aboriginal children. The use of special units on generic Aboriginal culture then become more and more obscure to Aboriginal children, who receive authentic cultural content in their daily lives at home. They also are subjected to a 'culture' of poverty and oppression that have come as a result of their colonial history. These issues are not raised in the schools, and the curriculum is sanitized to ensure that the picture of the government, the settlers, and their policies that led to the loss of their land and resources are not clouded with dispirited facts.

When most non-Aboriginal people think of why they would support the maintenance of Aboriginal consciousness and language in modern education, they view it as enabling Aboriginal students to

compete successfully with non-Aboriginal students. They suggest that Aboriginal people have an existing choice of access to the modes of interaction and life styles of an imagined Canadian society. Educators argue that school systems are not the contexts where Aboriginal identity, culture and language are maintained, but rather, a healthy community advancing their own objectives achieves this. However, the schools have been a deliberate source of the community's loss by their approved course of Eurocentric knowledge and English language instruction.

What kind of cognitive shock would schools be forced to endure if Aboriginal consciousness and language were to be respected, affirmed, and encouraged to flourish in the modern classroom, like the Constitution of Canada asserts? This has been, however, a frustrating process, as more and more Canadian educators and students have no idea about First Nations treaties and history, nor what they seek today for their future. Few disciplines have been enabling of the Indigenous peoples and their humanities, or to view the world from their perspective, to consider their context and choices against the colonial backdrop of Eurocentric education, residential schooling, and violence perpetrated on a nation.

Treaties acknowledge that First Nations peoples were not merely to assimilate into European society. The 1982 Constitution of Canada asserts that not only were Aboriginal rights not lost in this exchange, but also that Aboriginal people have specific rights, which must be supported by the federal government. What this means is that First Nations peoples retained rights not overtly given over to the federal government. This protection then extends to their language, the teaching, their governance, and their socialization of their children. The federal government has the constitutional fiduciary obligation of implementing the treaties, and when they contract with other schools, these same obligations apply.

The real empowerment comes when non-First Nations peoples and their children, society as a whole, come to understand the purpose, intention, and legal obligations of national and international treaties. It is not just an issue of political debate; it is a legal institutional and political reality in Canada and must be upheld in order for all the other Canadian values to be held.

What is apparent is the need for a serious and far-reaching examination of the assumptions inherent in modern thought. How these assumptions create the moral and intellectual foundations of modern society and culture have to be studied and written by Aboriginal people to allow space for Aboriginal consciousness, language and identity to flourish without ethnocentric or racist interpretation. The current educational shortcomings may or may not be in curriculum or finance or testing or community involvement, but no one will ever know nor the changes necessary for improvement without a deeper philosophical analysis of modern thought and educational practices.

The massive failure of educational practice aggravated by the present exclusive colonial systems of education must be addressed. Education must engage the capacity of First Nations students, not reinforce their deficits. These current practices exclude Indigenous knowledge(s) and ways of knowing. Knowledge invented elsewhere and imported to the educational schools is often and rightly understood to be a weapon of cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1986) wielded by educators who have it against those who must suffer it, a form of conquest and occupation of minds (Nandy, 1983) that serves to further colonize the life worlds of First Nations peoples (Duran & Duran, 1995), and to marginalize Indigenous humanities and voices. Analysis of this situation and the multiple ways in which imperialism's educational legacy continues to separate Indigenous peoples into primitive and deficient peoples is not enough. It is necessary to focus on the articulation of a holistic area of study known as the Indigenous Humanities.

The Indigenous Humanities and collective Indigenous knowledge has been invisible to many young people too long. In a subsequent signing of the Convention of Biological Diversity the Canadian government agreed to nationalize its support of First Nations knowledge so as to enable it to be viewed as a national treasury. However, educators have not kept pace with First Nations, with the Federal Government, with the Courts, and with International law. As a result, very little of these developments have entered into the educational enterprise, but remains stagnant at providing cultural knowledge, a diet of 'bannock, beads and feathers' that do little to educate or empower First Nations

children, much less educate the general public of the laws that regulate relations with the First Peoples of Canada. Some First Nations students already know about part of the Indigenous Humanities because they live in supportive First Nations environments and school systems that appreciate their language and culture. However, they do not understand the importance or depth of the meaning of these heritages or humanities. Many students have not been exposed to a supportive, nourishing First Nations heritage and linguistic environment. They struggle at the periphery of humanities. Similarly, teachers concerned with Indigenous knowledge(s) and ways of knowing, however, often find themselves working in isolation within the disciplinary silos of the Eurocentric humanities.

The concept of the Indigenous Humanities is a holistic area of study, asserting that knowledge and problem solving strategies evolved in First Nations as well and have a legitimate pride of place at the transfer table of contemporary knowledge production and exchange. In the place of the existing hierarchy of knowledge that equate "otherness" with ignorance, it would now appear to be in the interest of the academy, and society at large, to newly entertain the idea that indigenous knowledge is important and a transformative knowledge.

Fragments of the Indigenous Humanities are currently being developed across a variety of disciplines within secondary and post-secondary education (for example, English Studies, Fine Arts, and History, among others). In their present disjointed and fragmented state, the Indigenous Humanities have limited value as an educational tool or in identity formation for First Nations students. Teachers concerned with Indigenous knowledge(s) and ways of knowing, however, often find themselves working in isolation within the disciplinary silos of the Eurocentric humanities. What is needed is putting the "Humpty Dumpty" of the Indigenous Humanities (fragmented and shattered within Eurocentric educational systems) back together again. The crosscutting interdependencies of Indigenous Humanities unfold the tensions between dimensions of education as a promoter of Eurocentric cultures and as the promoter of processes of multicultural and inclusive reconciliation. A merge of Indigenous Humanities in education and in communications needs to be developed within Eurocentric educational institutions to build on the successes of First Nations band schools.

For example the lessons of the Indigenous humanity from *Falling Sky Woman* are valid for postcolonial educational practices.

- Pragmatic cooperation
- Strands of connectedness among diverse life forms—ecological, spiritual, human
- Humans are interdependent with nature and humans are most dependent on nature.
- Sharing and cooperation are basic precepts for life.
- Knowledge journey is central, but aided by others, both spiritual and worldly.

Wela'liq

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