YOU CAN'T ERASE HISTORY — YOU LEARN FROM IT

CLAUDETTE COMMANDA

Claudette Commanda is an Algonquin Anishinaabe elder from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation in Quebec. An alumna of the University of Ottawa faculties of Law and Arts, she has dedicated the last 35 years promoting First Nations people, history, culture and rights in various capacities as a University of Ottawa student, professor, member and chair of the Aboriginal education council, and via public speaking events. She has served as elder-in-residence and special adviser on reconciliation in the university's law faculty. In July, after previously serving on uOttawa's board of governors, she was appointed to a four-year term as the university's first Indigenous chancellor, and will begin her role on November 9th. Ms. Commanda has taught in uOttawa's Institute of Women's Studies, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Law and Indigenous Studies Program, including courses on First Nations Women, Native Education, First Nations People and History, Indigenous Traditions and Decolonization. She is the chief executive officer of the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres, a national organization that protects and promotes First Nations culture, languages and traditional knowledge. She is the CEO of the McLean Day Schools Settlement Corporation, which manages a $200-million legacy fund created as part of a $1.47-billion settlement between the federal government and the survivors and descendants of those who were forced to attend government-run Indian Day Schools. She was inducted into the Common Law Honour Society, served two terms on the board of governors for the First Nations University of Canada and three terms on the Kitigan Zibi band council. In March 2020, she received the 2020 Indspire Award for culture, heritage, and spirituality.

The following is the edited transcript of an interview with Claudette Commanda conducted in July by journalist and Carleton University professor Randy Boswell, guest editor of this volume. The interview took place during the visit to Canada by Pope Francis, during which he said: "I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous Peoples."

Q. What do you think about the Pope being here, and about what he said this week?

A. First, I want to clarify that I'm not a residential school survivor. And the Pope was here to apologize to residential school survivors. I am a day school survivor. But I am also an Algonquin woman, a First Nation person of this land called Canada — or what we know as Turtle Island — and to be honest, the Pope's visit here, to me, didn't make a difference — whether he came to Canada or not, whether he apologized or not. However, I know there are some residential school survivors who needed to hear this apology. And I know there were many residential school survivors who felt, like, why? Among survivors in my own family, the Pope coming here and this apology just opened up so many wounds, so many memories, so much hardship and pain... I don't even call them schools. They were institutions of genocide and assimilation and abuse and torture... The number one goal was to annihilate language and culture and spirituality. And what better way to do it than to attack the children?

Protecting and restoring Indigenous languages and cultures is very much at the centre of the work you do. Can you talk about that?

Absolutely. Because where did survivors find their healing? Where? It was returning back to the source of what the Creator has given us: our languages, our laws, our spirituality, our ceremonies. That's where our people found their peace and found their healing. Trauma is like grief. You never get over it; you live with it every day of your life. But you learn how to cope... Then there are triggers. The memories will always be with you. When I was listening to the Pope and watching the audience, I felt so numb and raw. I really had to hold back tears, because I could really feel what my people were feeling — even those that have gone on to the spirit world...

As you know, there's a debate happening around statues, place names and other commemorative landmarks in Canada. This has intensified over the past year — changes happening, resistance, controversy. In particular, Fathers of Confederation like John A. Macdonald and Hector Langevin, and other 19th-century "patriarchs" like Egerton Ryerson have been targeted because of their association with the Residential Schools system. How do you see this issue?

I have to start by commenting on the patriarchy. That's the problem right there — how Europe came here, invaded and imposed its patriarchy on our people. We've always been a matriarchal society. We've always included our men; but our women were always revered. Then they come here and put up all these statues to the 'Founding Fathers.' Excuse me? What did you find? We were not discovered. We've been here since time immemorial... From the First Nations perspective, we've always had our own forms of governance, our own systems of law and order, our own leaders — whether male or female.

You can't erase history. You learn from it. Those statues of Macdonald, for example. First of all, don't put him anywhere on our Indian lands — number one. He is not our saint. Let's say you're going to keep those statues. Canadians will say: "Oh, he's our first prime minister. Oh, he's the founding father of Confederation." Well, that's true. Canada was created in 1867, even though this land — Anishinaabe land — was here long before 1867. But you have this statue

of Macdonald, quoting his part in history. But right beside that has to be something else. It has to say: "He was the author of residential schools." And this is what they were all about. You've got to tell that truth, too. Don't erase history — learn from it. Some people might say, 'Claudette, why are you saying to keep those statues there. Why? Are you colonized?' No. As a matter of fact, I want this to be used as a teaching tool for all Canadians and the world to know what the hell he's done, this man, and Duncan Campbell Scott, and so on.

But as far as changing the names of streets and schools — yes. They should not have any schools or streets named after them. You're glorifying them. You're adoring them. You're giving them homage. No. These were evil men. If they were true at heart, they would never have done that to First Nations people... If Canada wants to maintain its prestigious, precious image in the international world — we're going to give you peace and freedom, we're going to take care of you. Really? Well, you'd better start taking care of the First Peoples of this land first and foremost. And you'd better atone for your history...

And I want to start seeing more statues of my people, of First Nation heroes. At the Canadian Museum of History, there's now a statue of one of the greatest Algonquin chiefs — Tessouat. I want to see statues of Pontiac, of Tecumseh. I want to see statues of all those great First Nation leaders who contributed to this country.

Your late grandfather, the Algonquin chief William Commanda, has been the focus of public recognition in various landmarks in the national capital recent years — a building, a street a bridge. What does that mean to you and your people?

It's validation. It's recognition. It gives us pride. And from a nation perspective, it gives us pride and honour to know that one of our own is respected and honoured that way. It raises our people up. We're not just an afterthought, or a token. We are given equal value as any other Canadian. It serves as education. And it helps build a relationship and dialogue. My grandfather was a firm believer in that. He said all people need to be validated. It validates who he was as an Algonquin person. As chief of our reserve. As the Supreme Chief of North America — he held the title. As our wampum belt carrier. As our grand elder of the Algonquin nation. It gives validation in who he was in bringing forth racial harmony and justice. And a world leader, in the same way as Nelson Mandela. That's beautiful and powerful. And for the family, we're very honoured. And we always reflect back on our grandfather's words and teachings. My grandfather was a man of peace and justice. But he also said: "Don't take me for granted. Just because I'm opening my circle here and including everyone, doesn't mean you can come here and take over. And it doesn't mean I'm giving you my land, because this will always be our land, and our rights."

How important do you think history and historians are to the project of reconciliation?

First and foremost, historians have to be telling the truth. If you look back in the past, the historians who have written our history, look at how they have portrayed my people — in a very negative way. Unfortunately, the government uses these historians, and so do the courts, to justify and develop policies that greatly impact First Nation peoples' lives. The taking of our lands and resources, to walk away from their obligations regarding aboriginal rights

and treaty rights and our inherent rights. There's been very harmful history.

It's time now that historians have to tell the truth. And non-Indigenous historians have to be working with First Nations people. We have our own historians. We always did. And those are our knowledge keepers. They learned and kept our oral histories and passed it on to the next generation. We shouldn't rewrite history in the sense of erasing it. But we need to write a new history, to learn from the past. And historians always need to work with First Nations people. We need to change the history books. We need to write a new curriculum. It's time now that "our" story replaces "his" story.

When it comes to steps being made toward reconciliation, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the country?

Hope is free. It's a great gift that the Creator has given every human being. And we have to always remain hopeful. And I am hopeful. But a small part of me still remains cautious. It's based on lived experience of oppression and racism and trauma. And you have to continue to be cautious — to say I have hope, but let's wait to see what your actions are. If you're not going to do the right actions, then it's all for naught. There's a difference between good intentions and right intentions. You have to do things in the right way... We have to educate the younger generation. The more dialogue we have, the more opportunities we have to tell our stories, the more opportunities for the truth to be told — in articles, or panel discussions, or circles, or any kind of forum — change will come. But there is still racism out there. And there are still cruel people out there... Sometimes it's very hard to be hopeful... We're still dealing with Helen Betty Osborne. We're still dealing with J.J. Harper. We're still dealing with Neil Stonechild. We're still dealing with Colten Boushie. We're still dealing with Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women. We're still dealing with the child welfare system. We're still dealing with the loss of our lands and natural resources. And the list goes on and on and on. When you hear some Canadians saying, "Well that's not our problem. We didn't do that." Well, you're part of Canada now. And this is your history. I don't care if you came here 500 years ago or five days ago, this is your history now. And you all have a responsibility for reconciliation.