



2020 February 19 - A Circle of All Nations/Romola V. Thumbadoo CAN/RVT Presentation for CACOR – Canadian Association of the Club of Rome entitled *Indigenous Elder William Commanda Perspectives on Climate Change and Environment*

A Mini Reflection on my Presentation at the Feb 19, 2020 Luncheon Event

Intermesh of Social Media, On-line Activism, Race and Culture, Art and Photography in the journey to the invitation to present to CACOR.

Preamble

I believe I may have known Yasmin Asgarali on Facebook for years, but we only connected in October 2019 and discovered common heritage as “Indian” women, she from Trinidad Tobago, me from South Africa, and both distanced from ancestral homelands, both geographers, both with passionate interest in English literature, art, photography, both stifled in our creativity in our youth by critical teachers in colonial domains, yet both still swimming. She was a member of the Canadian Association of the Club of Rome, and she decided to invite me to make a presentation about the environment and climate change. Somewhat uncharacteristically, I accepted immediately – I am much more tentative, cautious and exploratory about everything.



(Yasmin was supposed to introduce me on February 19 – but she did not show up. Then on February 22, 2020, I heard the tragic news that she had suddenly passed away).

This reflection is dedicated to Yasmin Asgarali, who opened a doorway to sharing Elder William Commanda’s *Circle of All Nations* work in the Club of Rome forum.

The following is the notice about the event that went out, and I only saw it by chance on the Sunday preceding the event. I was concerned, because I had intended only to speak about William Commanda and *Circle of All Nations* perspectives, and not appropriate Indigenous space on this critical topic of the times. Hence, we amended the title to read **Indigenous Elder William Commanda Perspectives on Climate Change and Environment**.

With this title, I wished to both distance my voice from that of Indigenous researchers and people at large, but at the same time ground insights and knowledge in the historical work of the Late Indigenous Elder William Commanda. He singlehandedly put Indigenous perspectives on environment on the local, national and global stage in a singular fashion, though of course,

countless other Indigenous peoples across the globe have iterated similar messages over the decades.

This issue is of critical importance in view of the fact that I, a non-Indigenous person, am assuming the responsibility and the right to research, interpret and document his knowledge, thinking, views and wisdom. It is also a rightfully significant acknowledgement of the unacceptability of appropriating Indigenous voice. In many ways, it is William Commanda's tremendous outreach and work at multiple levels that has in fact contributed to this awakening. In the absence of any Indigenous, organizational, community or available family support to project the multiple elements of his complex thinking, his unfunded work, and his unique animation of a *Circle of All Nations* to accomplish many of his objectives, he marshalled me into the role of supporter, assistant, reporter, speech writer and biographer; till his death he reviewed and quality controlled the nuance of the writing.

I myself had a certain understanding of the critical issues of colonization and colonialism through my own history in South Africa; beyond this, my own intensive work across the country in Indigenous justice from 1987 (Aboriginal Corrections, Aboriginal Policing, the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, and Aboriginal Justice, including a close relationship with the foremost voice in Indigenous Justice, Donald Marshall Junior – from 1996) on Indigenous justice issues, and innovative ways to address challenges via multiple bridge building strategies, prepared me to interface with William Commanda's objectives when I first met him on 11 April 1997; at that time he participated in an Aboriginal Justice Learning Network Elders Gathering that I was coordinating for the federal Department of Justice in its legally mandated responsibility to implement the Aboriginal Justice Strategy. The nature of the bridge building resonated with his own work, and he "recruited" me to join him with his; ironically at that time I was also obliged to see the limitations to creating real change within bureaucracy, and I therefore decided to take early retirement from the federal government to support the work of this Indigenous elder already then in his mid eighties for five years; five years became fourteen, the last fourteen years of his life.

Our relationship and work were intense, and after his death, I returned to school to research and document his unique approach to activism, knowledge generation and bridge building. My thesis entitled *Ginawaydaganuc and the Circle of All Nations: The Remarkable Environmental Legacy of Elder William Commanda(Thumbadoo, 2018 <https://curve.carleton.ca/...64d-8286-a901fcd77b06>)* completed in 2018 served to project his thinking into the academic world. This work continues with my postdoctoral research.

CACOR cordially invites you to the February 2020 CACOR Presentation

Date: Wednesday February 19th 2020

Time: 12:00 noon

Place: Army Officers' Mess, 149 Somerset Street West, Ottawa

Title: Indigenous Perspectives on Climate Change and Environment

Presenter: Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo

Cost: \$25 general admission; \$20 for members, their spouses and student guests. The downstairs ante-room and dining area will be open at **11:30am** for those who wish to meet and greet friends and colleagues prior to the session.

Please confirm attendance by e-mail toggreginnes@rogers.com on or before Monday February 16th.

About the presenter:

Romola Thumbadoo (aka Trebilcock) is Coordinator of the *Circle of All Nations* founded by late Indigenous Elder William Commanda (1913-2011, Officer of the Order of Canada, carrier of Sacred Wampum Belts, holder of two honorary doctorate degrees, canoe maker), and Research Associate and Personal Assistant to the Director at the Geomatics and Cartographic Research Centre (GCRC), Carleton University. She serves as Director of the Wolf Project, which is dedicated to honouring efforts to promote racial harmony.

Romola is of East Indian ancestry, was born in South Africa, and has resided in Canada since 1970, earning degrees in English Literature at McMaster University (BA Hons and MA). In 2018, she completed her PhD in Geography at Carleton University, under the supervision of Dr. D. R. F. Taylor, Director, GCRC. Her thesis is entitled *Ginawaydaganuc and the Circle of All Nations: The Remarkable Environmental Legacy of Elder William Commanda* (Thumbadoo, 2018 <https://curve.carleton.ca/...64d-8286-a901fcd77b06>)

For the over twenty years, she worked extensively across Canada for the federal government, chiefly within the criminal justice system (federal corrections, Aboriginal corrections policing, justice and restorative justice). From 1997, she supported the efforts of Elder William Commanda pro bono, to advance Indigenous priorities, social justice, peace building and respect for Mother Earth.

The *Circle of All Nations* is a global eco-community linked by Elder Commanda's unshakeable conviction that in a very fundamental way, as children of Mother Earth, we all belong together, irrespective of colour, creed or culture, and that together, we must affirm our respect for this penultimate mother. Thus, social justice, peace building and environmental stewardship are integrated in the work. Romola is the author of two books on the work of the William Commanda; she has published a photo journal on her kayaking explorations of Bitobi Lake, Quebec, viewed in part through the lens of Indigenous wisdom; and she animates *Circle of All Nations* work via social media, select events, outreach, advocacy and education.

She is presently also engaged postdoctoral studies and is developing a cybercartographic atlas on William Commanda's history and *Circle of All Nations* work at the GCRC, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

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The presentation was videotaped for CACOR by Bob Johnson
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lh6tJZm2Dpl&feature=youtu.be>

The discussion captures one lens into the William Commanda teachings and work.