

## **CANADIAN CRITICAL RACE CONFERENCE: PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE**

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### **Knowing the Indigenous 'Other' Beyond the 'Arrogance of Conscience'?**

"While the white people had much to teach us, we had much to teach them, and what a school could have been established upon that idea?" (Standing Bear 236). These words were expressed by Luther Standing Bear who was the first Lakota student to attend the Carlisle Indian boarding school in Pennsylvania when it first opened in 1879. More recently, a related question is addressed by a report "Learning About Walking in Beauty," measuring awareness and attitudes about Aboriginal peoples among young Canadians, released in Toronto in November 2002 where the chair of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, the Honorable Lincoln Alexander stated: "Clearly, Canadians know little but wish to know more about Aboriginal histories and cultures, which ought to be presented honestly and respectfully in school curricula" (CRRF News Release).

Such situation is hardly unique to Canada whether the question is the lack of knowledge pertaining to indigenous peoples or the inability to address the multiple marginalization of those peoples and their communities. It is suggested that in the United States, Native Americans are the least-understood groups even among academics (Champagne and Stauss 6). A clear lack of knowledge and correct information about the Sami prevails also among the majority of Finnish students, including those studying in teacher education (Rasmus).

In this paper, I intend to problematize some of the aspects of Standing Bear's wish as well as 'the wish to know more' about indigenous peoples and their cultures. How to teach about issues pertaining indigenous peoples and

cultures in a meaningful way that does not simplify or distort realities, values and perceptions that can be vastly different from those of the dominant mainstream society? Is it even possible to know and understand epistemic conventions radically different from those of one's own worldview? If the answer is yes, how do we go about it? If it is deemed impossible, are we forced to sanction the prevailing ignorance toward indigenous and other epistemes?

There are a few indigenous scholars who consider teaching other epistemes (or worldviews) not only impossible but also inappropriate because they will inevitably be either rejected, appropriated or misused. Vine Deloria maintains that "we would be on very thin ice if we purported to teach what I regarded as the cultural context of Indian life" (*Spirit & Reason* 157). For him, it is more important to focus on training better policy-makers for the future by teaching the history of the relationship between Native Americans and the federal government.

I think, however, the step of bringing indigenous epistemes and epistemologies into academia has already been taken, for example, simply by our presence, and that there is a heightened pressure particularly within indigenous scholarship itself to increasingly do so. Moreover, there is a clear need for concepts and tools to deal with complex issues of 'crosscultural' issues and communication which are not resolved by simply integrating inclusive material in curriculum. To acquire such tools necessitates certain basic understanding or comprehension of some of the aspects of indigenous epistemes. This is not, however, the same as teaching a fixed set of 'tribal values.' How can, then, such an understanding be achieved?

Many indigenous scholars note that even if there is a strong interest in indigenous peoples and their cultures, there is relatively little interest in addressing them on their own terms, and understanding indigenous perspectives

and values (Champagne, “American Indian Studies” 187). One of the most commonly heard suggestion to change this situation is to make information produced by indigenous people themselves more readily available for larger audiences. While not a bad idea in itself, this suggestion, however, forgets that there is already a good number of books and articles by indigenous writers and scholars widely available and accessible. The real problem lies elsewhere: because they are often written from a perspective based on a different, even foreign epistemic convention, many non-indigenous people may find them either too challenging or too simplistic – in any case, not what they are looking for.

Another suggestion, the often heard encouragement to ‘listen to our elders’ is not as easy and straightforward as we think first either. As it is wrong to assume that anyone without previous knowledge or intensive training can grasp, say, international law, it is improper to expect a person unfamiliar with epistemic and cultural conventions embedded in elders teachings to appreciate and understand them which can be highly metaphorical and complex.

While increasing the number of indigenous scholars as faculty could serve a way of breaking away from the cycle of ignorance, it also poses certain dangers. Increasing indigenous faculty may offer for non-Native academics another excuse to consider themselves relieved of their responsibilities to Native students (Stein 107). Even if it is necessary to make the university more reflective of the population and introduce new forms of knowledge and practices, it is important to recognize that these procedures can also reinforce systemic racism if, for example, indigenous scholars are relegated into the status of Native Informants and token symbols of an inclusive university (Kelly 155-6).

In using indigenous scholars for educating non-indigenous public poses also a problem of ‘the politics of distraction’ (Smith) – diverting the attention of indigenous people from their own priorities to the priorities of the dominant

society. If not indigenous scholars, who then should educate non-indigenous people about indigenous epistemes in a befitting manner? Or should we make this one of our priorities, based on an assumption that it might positively contribute to our other priorities in our communities (the academic community included)? This discussion is yet to happen among ourselves.

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It is a widely recognized fact that any attempt or claim to know (about) other peoples and cultures is riddled with problems and dangers. As knowing is often associated with power and control, it is argued that having (or claiming to have) and producing knowledge of other peoples reflects the desire, if not to possess, to tame and consume the other. Gayatri Spivak suggests that in this way, the other is conventionalized into the dominant discourse and the epistemic discontinuity that might have existed is neutralized while the 'subaltern' is constructed as monolithic (*Critique* 284).

This is certainly the experience of indigenous peoples worldwide. Producing early colonial knowledge and representations about the 'primitives' in the colonies and other far away places made it possible to claim ownership over territories and resources belonging to people who were not considered fully human (and in the worst cases, not even existent). Spivak also discusses the danger of the Eurocentric arrogance of conscience; a simplistic assumption that as long as one has sufficient information, the person can understand the 'other' (*Critique* 171). In other words, this position suggests that merely having the right amount and type of information will guarantee an easy access to and understanding of any cultural convention or epistemic tradition.

In critical and anti-racist pedagogy and theory, however, it is often

asserted that merely teaching cultural codes rules and values of other people is not only inadequate but also inappropriate for it suggests that the history of oppression no longer plays a role in contemporary relations in society. It is argued that the idea of cultural sensitivity – being aware of certain central cultural behaviour of another groups of people – only produces a ‘catalogue of cultural differences’ while colonial relations remain unaddressed. (cf. Razack 8 and Ng 90). As Sherene Razack proposes, “education for social change is not so much about new information as it is about disrupting the hegemonic ways of seeing through which subjects make themselves dominant” (10).

This kind of ‘harmonious, empty pluralism’ is said to lead to what Chandra Mohanty calls ‘the race industry’; a process which diminishes collective, historical and institutional inequities to individual and psychological levels (198). It implies that dominant discourses are no longer characterized by racism, sexism and other biased, stereotypical attitudes and that “with a little practice and the right information, we can all be innocent subjects, standing outside hierarchical social relations” (Razack 10). This is, of course, not the case even in the academy which often remains reluctant to engage in a transformative dialogue and respectful relationship with other epistemes and instead, desperately clings to the status quo.

Why does the academy appear so hesitant and disinclined? Considering the endless number of studies on and information of practically every imaginable topic dealing with indigenous peoples worldwide, how can the general ignorance on indigenous epistemes continue to be so pervasive? There are several reasons for the reluctancy, ranging from simple laziness of academics to divert their attention to anything else outside their own fields of study to unwillingness to give up privilege and power and change the status quo that appears to serve best those who are the most unsympathetic and unwilling to recognize – never

mind act upon – their responsibility toward the ‘other.’ As expressed by a non-indigenous faculty member:

In my experience, when indigenous perspectives are genuinely included in the curriculum and the classroom, the epistemic and pedagogical changes involved are *huge*. I believe that is why so many otherwise forward-looking faculty resist it or don’t manage to ‘get around’ to it – because of implicit recognition that their epistemic and pedagogical power will be eroded. (Courtenay-Hall, personal communication)

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While recognizing the validity of the danger of only teaching cultural codes, I do believe that there must be room for *both* new information *and* practices of disrupting hegemonic ways of seeing. The ‘problem of knowing’ is so complex and multilayered that we cannot limit ourselves and our practices to single solutions. Moreover, we cannot neglect the fact that education toward eradicating epistemic ignorance also demands appropriate, in-depth awareness and knowledge about indigenous epistemes. It is argued that “[i]f universities are to respect the cultural integrity of First Nations students and communities” there is need for the institutional legitimization and respect for indigenous knowledge (Kirkness & Barnhardt 8). In my view, achieving this state of respect remains impossible as long as there is no adequate knowledge and information about indigenous communities and knowledge.

How can we then, in the necessary process of learning about indigenous epistemes, to avoid “a superficial reading of differences that makes power relations invisible and keeps dominant cultural norms in place” (Razack 9)? How can the gift of indigenous epistemes be brought to the academy in a way that it is not reduced into just another supplement and aspect of the ‘race industry’ within

the liberal diversity? How can the academy recognize its responsibility, (response-ability), answer-ability and accountability toward the other?

Once again, there is no either-or answers to this question. If we look at the notion of hospitality, both parties, the guest and the host, have their responsibilities in building a lasting, reciprocating relationship. While we, as indigenous people, do need to accept educating others as one of our priorities and responsibilities (as most of us have done, willy-nilly, already), the non-indigenous people in the academy, as well as in the rest of society, need to assume their responsibilities and the need for doing their homework. As Jennifer Kelly points out, arguments suggesting that non-Native instructors should not teach issues related to Native peoples can function to further marginalize them “as separate from the Canadian social, historical, and political fabric, and can absolve us from *our responsibility to do the cultural and historical homework necessary to teach the materials effectively*” (156, emphasis added).

For Spivak, doing homework is a continuous practice to find out as much as possible about the areas on which the scholar is taking risks (*Maailmasta* 21). Another central aspect of doing one’s homework is the process of unlearning one’s privilege. Instead of disavowing responsibility by simplistic breast-beating (“O.K., sorry, we are just very good white people, therefore we do not speak for the blacks”) that allows business go on as usual, she urges these people to “de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other” (*Post-Colonial* 121). In other words, instead of taking a deterministic position, one has to examine the historical circumstances and articulate one’s own participation in the formation that created various forms of silencing (cf. Spivak, *Post-Colonial* 62; *Critique* 284). One also has to take a risk; “to say ‘I won’t criticize’ is salving your conscience, and allowing you not to do any homework” (*Post-Colonial* 62-3).

We also might find helpful guidance in Spivak's idea of 'transnational literacy' which seeks to "distinguish between the varieties of decolonization on the agenda, rather than collapse them as 'postcoloniality'" ("Teaching" 193). This kind of 'literacy' may help us to actively avoid the colonial containment – whether arrogant or benevolent – of the 'other.' Such literacy may also constantly remind us to guard against superficial and stereotypical cultural representations and constructions presented to us by the media and market. This kind of literacy *must* constantly work particularly hard to escape idealistic and simplistic assumptions of the 'race industry.' As its starting point as well as a persistent point of reference, it has to acknowledge the impossibility of uncomplicated understanding of other epistemes. It has to recognize the inherent circular reciprocity and responsibility toward the other and emphasize the openness toward learning (as well as the necessity of learning to learn).

A central, indispensable part of this responsibility is to accept and be guided by the recognition that 'knowing other peoples and cultures' is not only about increasing knowledge and understanding or changing attitudes, but necessarily and equally importantly, about addressing systemic power inequalities and hegemony in the academy as well as in society at large. Put in another way, the academy can and must start doing its homework by rethinking its relationship as well as epistemological and ontological assumptions, structures and prejudices toward indigenous peoples and their epistemes.

In conclusion, I think we have to recognize and accept that there is no single, uncomplicated and exhaustive answer to the complex question of 'knowing the other.' The gift of indigenous epistemes needs to be recognized, accepted and respected even if it might not be possible to fully grasp and contain it. Asking for a full comprehension may not only prove impossible but may also represent a colonizing, totalizing attempt to subsume the other. In our attempts to

transform the academy, we cannot forget how historically, knowing indigenous peoples has been an integral part of colonization. It is thus necessary to engage in the problematics of 'knowing others' in multiple ways and recognize the value of various different strategies and processes. As we need practical suggestions for teachers in their daily work and changes in curriculum and pedagogy, we also need to acknowledge and accept the fact that there is a need for accurate, appropriate knowledge on indigenous and other marginalized peoples and their epistemes.

In other words, we have to stop looking for a single global solution which always is "deeply marked by the moment of colonialist influence" (Spivak, *Post-Colonial* 15). It is clear that the question of 'knowing the other' will not and should never come to a close because in the moment we assume the problem solved, we arrive at a totalizing closure – another symptom of the colonial. Instead of yearning for a final answer and solution, we need to accept that it is a continuous, never-ending process of negotiation and productive crisis in which we work continuously toward a new way of thinking and ultimately a new relationship in which the academy is compelled to recognize and accept its responsibility toward the other. Only in that way, the academy will be able to profess its very profession of multiple truths in a proper and competent manner (cf. Derrida, "Future of the Profession").

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