

# WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE POLITICS OF LABELLING AND NATIVE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

This paper analyzes how Native identities are (re-)constructed and (re-)affirmed through the use and circulation of (ethnic) labels. Labelling is a political act since labels include and exclude. Using the term 'First Nation' to describe traditionally clan and family oriented societies is one attempt of First Nations people to negotiate their way into the Canadian (political) consciousness. Since legal policies such as the Indian Act still fragment the Native population, the construction of a homogeneous national identity, e.g. through collective labels, such as 'First Nations' or 'Aboriginal/Native people', is one tool to resist outside domination and to empower Aboriginal people. Especially so when Euro-Canadian discourses frequently ignore expressed preferences and continue to perpetuate negative stereotypes.

L'article analyse comment les identités autochtones sont (re)construites et (ré)affirmées en raison de l'utilisation et de la diffusion d'étiquettes (ethniques). L'étiquetage est un acte politique, parce que les étiquettes incluent et excluent. Le recours à l'expression « Première nation » pour décrire des sociétés traditionnellement axées sur la famille et le clan est une tentative des peuples autochtones d'établir leur présence dans la conscience (politique) canadienne. Étant donné que des politiques juridiques telles que la *Loi sur les Indiens* fragmentent toujours la population autochtone, la création d'une identité nationale homogène en adoptant des étiquettes collectives telles que « Premières nations » et « peuples autochtones » est un outil de résistance à la domination extérieure et d'habilitation des peuples autochtones. Cela est particulièrement vrai lorsque les discours euro-canadiens ignorent fréquemment les préférences exprimées des Autochtones et continuent de perpétuer des stéréotypes négatifs.

## Introduction

In this paper I will look at how Native people are defined and classified in Canadian society and in turn how they define themselves, i.e. I will discuss the issue of labelling. Emancipation from state-imposed names and labels such as the misnomer 'Indian'<sup>1</sup> is one aspect of the general trend by Aboriginal people to rid themselves of outside domination. Labelling has real-world-consequences as the term 'Indian' is not value-free but rather negatively connoted and these connotations continue to shape both the direction of federal policy and popular prejudices towards the Aboriginal population in Canada. How people refer to themselves, or are referred to by others, shape not only their own perception but also other people's view of who they are. Negative labels (and implications) can disempower groups through the creation of potent negative stereotypes and can thus be a powerful means of exercising social control and a tool to manipulate identities.

My interpretations are based on the assumption that reality and thus identity are discursively constructed. The constructed and controlled identities of individuals and groups of people are neither fixed nor 'natural' but rather a discursive process. The implications of the historically constructed meanings of the label 'Indian' need to be examined in terms of the process of identity formation as well as in connection with the names and labels that Aboriginal people in Canada choose to identify themselves in the public sphere today. Collective terms such as 'First Nations,' 'Native people,' and 'Aboriginal people' are a specific response to historical and contemporary political, economic and social problems and solutions. Overall, the conscious choice of these labels for self-identification and the rejection of imposed terminology are fundamental to the construction and affirmation of political and social identities.

### The Image of the 'Indian'

*RUSTY: The girl doesn't know I exist. I don't know if it's because I'm Indian or because she thinks I'm a flake. I'm not sure which is worse.*

*KEESIC: [Looking puzzled.] What's an Indian?*

*RUSTY: Oh, that's right, you've never heard the word.*

*MICHAEL: It's a generic term used to describe all original inhabitants of this land. It was popular up until approximately 100 years ago, my time. In fact, right around your time. [Points to RUSTY.] The more politically correct terms in this day and age are "Native" or "Aboriginal." (Taylor 1990:34)*

Drew Hayden Taylor's play *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* aims at the stereotypical images of Aboriginal people in Canada and tries to tran-

scend these in a humorous way. He uses three young Anishinabek characters from all through history who meet at Dreamer's Rock, a (real) place where generations of Native people have gone for spiritual guidance. Keesic is a 16-year-old boy from the past, about 400 years ago. Rusty is a contemporary Native teenager and Michael is from the future in the year 2095. *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* attempts to explore the concept of what 'being Native' means to different people in different times. Keesic's question, "What's an Indian?" refers to the fact that 'the Indian' is the invention of the European. When Columbus arrived on the shores of Turtle Island there were a large number of different and distinct Indigenous cultures, but there were no 'Indians.' In his book *The White Man's Indian* Berkhofer Jr. (1978:3) writes:

*Since the original inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere neither called themselves by a single term nor understood themselves as a collectivity, the idea and the image of the Indian must be a White conception. Native Americans were and are real, but the Indian was a White invention.*

The image of the Indian began with the initial historical colonial moment of contact. From this time onwards the conception of the image of the Indian downgraded the original inhabitants to the category of the 'other,' that is, the representative entity outside one's own social group, class, culture or civilization. Broadly speaking, all non-Western cultures and civilizations are seen as the 'other' of the west (e.g. Said 1978, 1993; Blaut 1993). The most common representation of the 'other' is as the binary opposite of oneself, e.g. *we* are civilized, *they* are barbaric. From this 'other' position mainly three constructions of images or stereotypes evolved.

First, the traditional 'Indian' was constructed in terms of the images of either the 'Savage' or the 'Noble Savage.'<sup>2</sup> The latter image emerged probably due to the friendly relationship that existed between the Native inhabitants and the European settlers, who were welcomed and helped to establish themselves in the new land. Eventually Aboriginal people became allies in war and trade. This early image of the 'Noble Savage' inspired the imagination of many European writers and this stereotype was romanticized to the fullest.

Second, the portrayal of Native people as 'Savages,' who are violent and barbaric, superstitious, illogical and in general inferior, was rooted in the assumption that 'Indians' served no purpose to the colonial effort. When they were not needed anymore either as military or economic allies they became a hindrance.

Third, the constructed images of the modern 'Indian' depict Native people as poor, assimilated, as substance abusers, gamblers or mili-

tants. Throughout history these images served to define the 'Indian' "in ways that both explained the nature of indigenous life in terms that Europeans could comprehend, and rationalized the occupation and confiscation of their traditional lands" (Coates 1999:25). At all times these constructed images of 'the Indian' were initiated, maintained and perpetuated through the dominant society and its discursive practices including institutionalized discourses and media representations. The image of Aboriginal people as either 'good' or 'bad' reduced them to two-dimensional symbols, which had consequences in the real world. Public policies were based on the assumption that the "Imaginary Indian" corresponded to an actual reality, which in turn affected the social and individual construction of identities for Native people.<sup>3</sup>

These stereotypes of Aboriginal people are still at work today. As Valentine (1996:403) concludes in her discussion of the *London Free Press* coverage (a mainstream newspaper of Western Ontario) of the events at Ipperwash / Stoney Point in 1995: "On a general review of the news stories two primary constructions emerge: "Natives" as romantic oriental (in fact, the term "noble savage" is utterly appropriate to this presentation), otherwise "friend," and "Natives" as the enemy." Lawrence and Simon (1996) discussing the same event and the same newspaper find that the coverage was biased against the actions of the Native people involved. Native people were represented as violent and militaristic, greedy and insane.<sup>4</sup>

From the perspective of the dominant Euro-Canadian society Aboriginal people are still often perceived as 'Savages' in terms of their 'violent and rebellious actions,' and as 'socio-political problems' with respect to the 'unemployed Indian problem', the 'Indian land problem,' the 'Indian health- and welfare problem' etc. The negative identities constructed in this way and the dominant attitude of superiority have been part of the connotations of the term 'Indian' for centuries. Applying the term 'Indian' also shows the ignorance and unwillingness of mainstream Canadian society to acknowledge First Nations as distinct groups of people whose cultures and identities are not frozen in time but rather dynamic as well as their efforts to offset the external imagery. The continuous use of the label 'Indian' shows how firmly entrenched the image of the 'Indian' is in the societal psyche. One of the most basic ways of showing respect for others is to refer to them by the names with which they have chosen to identify themselves. Using the term 'Indian' as a cultural outsider when other terms are available and preferred demonstrates a lack of awareness of, and respect for, the efforts of First Nations people to determine their own futures and identities.

An example from the *First Nations Messenger* (FNM), the first na-

tional Native newspaper published by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), illustrates the Native norm with respect to labelling:

- (1) **First Nations people** have suffered and endured unfair treatment from government policies for many generations. Many do not know that it was illegal for an "Indian" to retain and instruct legal counsel until 1952. In court cases [...] the federal and provincial governments deliberated on "Indian" matters, without the participation of the "Indians." **First Nations** have come a long way [...]. (Mayes 1999:12)

The unmarked linguistic references are the preferred and self-imposed terms First Nations people and First Nations whereas the label "Indian" is linguistically marked (by quotation marks) and thus indicates a deviation from the (Native) norm.

### The 'In-Group Indian'

The shifting of membership categories in Native discourse, e.g. replacing 'Indian' with 'Aboriginal,' 'Native' and 'First Nations' shows that discourses are dynamic, and that these shifts reflect wider processes of socio-political change. To use the term 'Indian' as a cultural outsider has become inappropriate, in fact, almost impossible in the 1990s - at least in political and academic discourse. The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), responsible for the administration of First Nations communities and other issues pursuant to the Indian Act, suggests following the preferred usage, typically the term 'First Nation(s)' except in some cases: in direct quotations and when citing titles of books and works of art, when using the three categories of 'Indians' as defined in the Indian Act, i.e. 'Status Indian,' 'Non-Status Indian' and 'Treaty Indian,' and in statistical information using these categories (DIAND 1997, 2002).<sup>5</sup>

Using the label 'Indian' as a cultural insider can be seen as a marker of group solidarity and as part of First Nation people's identities since they have long had definitions of 'Indianness' imposed upon them by the dominant society which eventually became internalized and thus accepted as part of their identity (Sawchuk 1992). In such a context, the term is not considered or treated as offensive as the following interview excerpt with a Cree woman illustrates:

- (2) We used to have sleighs and horses, the horses would pull the sleigh and all of us would be lying there in a row **ten little Indians** and my mother put a thick heavy blanket on us.  
[...]

If you're obviously **Indian**, if you're dark skinned and you've got all the biological traits including your language [...].

(Madeleine Dion-Stout, personal communication)

In Native text and talk one can also find the label 'Indian' used as a synonym denoting the same as 'Native,' Aboriginal' or 'First Nation.' As such it collectively describes the Aboriginal population in Canada including the Métis, non-Status Indians and possibly the Inuit since these are recognized as 'Aboriginal people':

*(3) There is much discussion about the preservation of the **Aboriginal** "voice," how **Indians** are moving to gain control over technologies to tell our own stories. There is now a national **Aboriginal** television network, and *The Messenger* is the first newspaper with a national distribution to **First Nations** citizens. [...] But the ability to create and distribute our own messages is only part of the answer to **Indian** communications challenges. (Switzer 2000:5)*

The fact that the term 'Indian' is still employed by Native people (although other labels are available) possibly shows, on the one hand, the extent to which the externally imposed term and identity concept 'Indian' has been internalized and (unconsciously) accepted among Aboriginal people. This is confirmed in an article from the *Anishinabek News*, a monthly Native newspaper published by the Union of Ontario Indians (UOI)-Anishinabek Nation:

*(4) Asserting our rights in how we define ourselves is a priority, but please do not correct an Elder when they are referring to themselves as "Indians." Most Elders attended the Residential School system and that is what they learned [...]. Reclaiming our identities should be focused on our generations. (Beaudry 2000:13)*

On the other hand, it might also reflect a more ironic and counter-acting practice, where the 'Indian' is used to show pride and solidarity with the in-group ('we Injuns') despite external definitions and categories.

Today, however, Aboriginal people (re-)construct and (re-)interpret their identities and histories in light of current preoccupations. Contemporary definitions of First Nations identity arise from the First Nations themselves, not from the expectations or stereotyped images of the dominant Euro-Canadian society.

### **Native / Aboriginal vs. native / aboriginal**

The generic labels 'Aboriginal' and 'Native' have been gradually replacing 'Indian' since the 1970s. The opposition to the White Paper of 1969 was one reason for non-Status Indians, Inuit and Métis to form political organizations on a national scale and to demand Aboriginal rights

along with Status Indians represented by the National Indian Brotherhood (later renamed Assembly of First Nations, AFN). In the 1970s, these diverse groups of Aboriginal ancestry adopted the term 'Native,' and in the 1980s the term 'Aboriginal,' to refer to members of all of these groups. (Burnaby 1999:306-307).

The Canadian Constitution (The Constitution Act, 1982) refers to and recognizes three distinct groups of Aboriginal people in Canada. It uses the generic adjective 'aboriginal' to include the Indian, Inuit and Métis people. The preferred use nowadays, however, is to capitalize the terms Aboriginal and Native and to use them as a modifier, e.g. 'consultations with Aboriginal people' and not 'consultations with Aborigines.' Failing to adhere to these conventions especially in the case of known preferences is not simply a stylistic faux pas but a sign of resistance to change or a sign of perpetuating a superior attitude towards Native people and indicative of disrespect and even, in some cases, contempt. Looking at the mainstream newspaper coverage of the AFN election in July 2003 both nouns and adjectives denoting Aboriginal groups are consistently represented using lower case letters. The preference to use the terms as modifiers is ignored, too. The following example is taken from *The Globe and Mail*, one of Canada's leading newspapers:

(5) *In a separate interview Tuesday, Mr. Fontaine called the new **native** legislation "regressive" and said the AFN needs to "start all over." New legislation should still protect the rights of **native people** while ensuring open and transparent leadership, he told Newsworld. Another challenge facing **native chiefs** is the fact that Canada has 633 different **native chiefs** and **natives** who speak 80 different languages.*

[...] *a growing number of **aboriginals** say the national leadership has lost touch with its constituents. (Dunfield 2003:A3)*

To capitalize the words 'Native' and 'Aboriginal' is most likely an editorial decision. However, there exists a capitalization convention in the case of words denoting human groups with respect to nation and nationality such as in 'Canadian people' or 'German minister.' Not complying with those conventions reflects the dominant attitude of Euro-Canada: denying First Nations their status as distinct peoples/nations.

The attitude of the dominant society institutionalized and represented in mainstream media discourse is apparent not only with respect to ignoring capitalization conventions but also with regard to linguistic means realizing a relation of 'having' or 'belonging':

(6) *Canada's **native leaders** ousted Matthew Coon Come as their grand chief on Wednesday amid concerns his confrontational approach dealing with Ottawa was stalling efforts*

*to improve the lives of **aboriginal** people.*

*[...] The election of a new leader for the primary national lobbying group for **Canada's Indians** comes as **native** leaders are fighting with the federal government over a proposal to overhaul the country's 127-year-old Indian Act. All three candidates oppose the proposed changes, which critics say infringe on **Indians'** constitutional and territorial rights. (Reuters, 2003)*

The expressions "Canada's native leaders," and "Canada's Indians" can be read as indicating colonial attitudes according to which Aboriginal people are seen as 'wards of the state'. Linguistically this is realized through the genitive (apostrophe + s) which functions like a possessive determiner. According to an AFN terminology guide phrases such as the ones just quoted are not acceptable: "Avoid the phrase, "Canada's First Nations" – given the Nation to Nation relationship many First Nations have with the Crown through their Treaties this phrase is not acceptable." As more appropriate phrasing "First Nations in Canada" or "First Nations citizens" is suggested with the justification that First Nations "are situated in Canada, Canada is ours – Canada does not own us!" (AFN Fact Sheet, May 2000). Moreover, capitalizing conventions and expressed preferences are ignored in example (6) above ("aboriginal people" and "native leaders") to the extent that the politically incorrect label 'Indian' is used.

Negatively connoted labels such as the term 'Indian' show the lack of historical contextualization and of recognizing cultures as dynamic. As Oboler (1995:xvi) observes about ethnic labels: "Far from being merely a method of social organization, they become the means of stigmatization. [...] The label's negative connotations become manifested in the discriminatory practices that in turn designate the group's status in the society." Native people in Canada confront negative connotations and stereotypes and thus hegemonic practices by using self-chosen terms and labels to refer to themselves and their histories. Besides adopting the labels 'Aboriginal' and 'Native' as self-referential terms, 'First Nation(s)' has become a high frequency label inseparable from political mobilization.

### **First Nation(s)**

In this section I will discuss the term 'First Nations' and its shifting meanings from an originally political term used for Aboriginal nations who are legally defined in the Indian Act to an all inclusive term used even for individual identities.

When social relations in some areas of a given society are in a state



of flux, the related language also shows change. The label 'First Nation(s)' is a case in point. It emerged as a result of particular historical and socio-political contexts and is thus socially shaped, but also socially shaping since the names people choose to identify themselves in the public sphere are fundamental to the construction of political and social identities.

The designation 'First Nation(s)' originally referred to Aboriginal people who fall under the jurisdiction of the Indian Act, i.e. Status-Indians generally living in a First Nations community ('reserve'), and who are politically represented on a national level by the Assembly of First Nations. In 1981 at the height of the Canadian Constitutional debate the National Indian Brotherhood changed its name to the Assembly of First Nations as a reaction to the dominant political rhetoric at this time which kept referring to the 'two founding nations' (French and British) of Canada.<sup>6</sup> The term 'First Nation' has come into use as a direct result of that dispute and thus strictly as a political statement (John Moses, Mohawk, Native History Researcher / Canadian Museum of Civilization Hull, personal communication).

Many communities have adopted the term 'First Nation' to replace the term 'Indian band' or 'Indian reserve' as the following example suggests:

(7) *The most important message arising from the Dialogue Circles is the "thirsts" for information and communication vehicles in **First Nations communities**. Participants suggested that Assembly of First Nations publications have a role to play in connecting **First Nations**, allowing **First Nations** to network with each other and with the AFN. [...] Individuals want to know what is happening in other **First Nations**. (Editorial Board 1998:7)*

Moreover, the term 'First Nations' has expanded its meaning to include also the other two groups of Aboriginal people that the Constitution recognizes, namely the Métis and Inuit, as well as Non-Status Indians. The terms 'Native,' 'Aboriginal' and 'First Nation(s)' are often used interchangeably / synonymously as illustrated in the example below. As such they collectively describe the Aboriginal population in Canada.

(8) *The march to **First Nation self-government** will be led by a growing army of increasingly better-educated **Native students**. [...] Today nearly 30,000 **Aboriginal students** attend post-secondary institutions [...].*

*[...], there is going to be a strong need for **First Nations professionals** in all areas, especially teaching. [...]. (Goulais 2000:9)*

The collective identity created in this way suggests a recontextualization and transformation of former identity concepts. In the face of a dominant majority and of changing social, political, cultural, legal or economic conditions it becomes crucial for the Aboriginal population in Canada to redefine their identity. Since legal policies such as the Indian Act still fragment the Native population the construction of a homogeneous national identity is one tool to resist outside domination, to empower Aboriginal people and to foster solidarity (see Conclusion in this paper on the Western notion of the concept of the nation). How First Nations people represent themselves in public, for example, in the news, contributes to the ways in which they see themselves and how others perceive them. Representing themselves as a unity is strategic; collectivity is a precondition to get heard. A shared cultural and / or political identity as First Nations makes it possible to gain wider attention for their agenda and is a means of making a difference on vital issues such as self-determination, land and resources, education etc.

Including the Métis as members of the in-group labelled 'First Nations' as in example (9) is one discursive strategy to overcome the divisions created through the imposed legal statuses. The construction of a shared national identity is thus part of the resistance politics of Aboriginal people in Canada and a means in the context of socio-political unification.

**9) *Our response as First Nations must be one of resistance and insistence. We must resist the pressures of exposing our people to the social transformation of dominant culture [...]. We must insist on the jurisdiction of First Nations as the sole determiners of our educational future. (Fiddler 2001:11)***

The caption under this newspaper article reads, "Don Fiddler is a Métis from Saskatchewan." Through the use of inclusive 'we,' its corresponding possessive pronoun 'our' and the collective label 'First Nations' the author clearly constructs a collective identity (as First Nation) for himself and the group he represents, namely the Métis.

Another example of a variety of Aboriginal identities being included in the category 'First Nation(s)' are representations in Native academic discourse. In a collection of essays about Native authors and Native literature editor Jeannette Armstrong (1993) uses the term 'First Nations literature' as an overall label for any literature produced by Aboriginal people. In her introduction it becomes quite apparent that Armstrong employs the term 'First Nations' as an all inclusive term reaching across geographic borders (Native writers from the USA are included as well) and across urban and rural, modern and traditional life experiences:

(10) I suggest that **First Nations cultures**, in their various contemporary forms, whether an urban-modern, pan-Indian experience or clearly a tribal specific (traditional or contemporary), whether it is Eastern, Arctic, Plains, Southwest or West Coastal in region, have unique sensibilities which shape the voices coming forward into written English. [...] I suggest that **First Nations Literature** will be defined by **First Nations writers, readers, academics and critics** [...].

[...] I decided to edit a collection of Native academic voices on **First Nations Literature** and include views on the relevance of **First Nations literary analysis**. (Armstrong 1993:7-8).

A collective national identity is constructed within this representation. Originally used in a restricted political sense applied to a specific group of people, i.e. Status-Indians, the label 'First Nations' has become a high frequency term gaining a stable position in Native discursive practices. Used as a noun and as a modifier it refers to everything and everybody 'Aboriginal' in the most general sense as Armstrong's quotation above and the following selection of examples from the *First Nations Messenger* and *Anishinabek News* suggest: 'First Nation business community,' 'First Nation entrepreneurs,' 'First Nation job seekers,' 'First Nation's education,' 'First Nations lawyers,' 'First Nations children,' 'First Nations artists/art,' 'First Nations media,' 'First Nations Elders,' 'First Nations individuals,' 'First Nations voters' etc.

Terms such as 'First Nations Elders' and 'First Nations individuals' position and represent Aboriginal people in and through discourse not only as a collective and political entity. The label is also used to mediate personal identities and, as examples (11), (12) and (13) by Drew Hayden Taylor suggest, illustrates that identity is not fixed but rather fluid and multiple, and that identity markers are context-dependent:

(11) **The term First Nation, to me, is a political phrase, often used to describe what used to be called a reserve. For instance, I come from the Curve Lake First Nation. But personally, I am a little uncomfortable being called a First Nation person because I do not consider myself a political term. Therefore to say I am First Nations limits me to a strictly political nature or definition.** (Taylor 1999a:86)

(12) **We as First Nations people, are pursuing an admirable and exciting, though difficult, road.** (Taylor 1999b:21)

(13) **As a First Nations writer, the battles become a distinct story in their own. In my career I have survived such literary questions as "Do Native people really do that?" [...].** (Taylor 2000:4)

The above exemplifies what was stated earlier in this paper. The

label 'First Nation(s)' originally emerged as a result of particular historical and socio-political contexts and is thus socially shaped. However, it is also socially shaping. Whereas in (11) Taylor rejects the term First Nation to refer to himself as he associates it with a strict political meaning, in examples (12) and (13) he represents himself as being part of the collective group of First Nations. He is linguistically constructing a 'we-group' as in (12) and thus expresses identification with the so constructed group. Although not explicitly stated (e.g. 'I as a First Nations writer') the immediate context of (13) invites the interpretation that the "First Nations writer" refers to Taylor himself.

These examples show that the self-imposed label 'First Nation(s)' has received a positive response and has thus acquired widespread adoption into various semantic domains. It has come to embody a collective character for First Nations in Canada appealing not so much to a common culture or language but to a shared history of internal colonialism and to a shared reality today.

### **Conclusion: Ideological Implications of Labelling**

Refusing to wear externally constructed and imposed labels is one form of resistance and thus one form of resisting hegemonic power structures. Cultural qualifiers are not merely names applied to a group of people. They help shaping the groups to which they are attached. Consequently, language and the power of attaching labels to identify people is very much an ongoing political issue. How First Nations represent themselves in public is pivotal for identity politics. Especially news representations are very powerful. Positive representations in the Native media contribute to the (re-)construction and (re-)affirmation of Native identities and, as Hall (1997) has pointed out, have real consequences with respect to the lives, rights and position of the so presented group in society. Consequently, representing themselves as 'First Nations' plays a constitutive role, not merely a reflexive one and shows that Native cultures—and more generally, each generation—(re-)construct and (re-)interpret their identities and histories in the light of contemporary conditions. The shared experience of colonialism, the identity- and culturally-destructive experience of residential schools, or the problems and challenges faced by Aboriginal people nowadays make identification with a common cause and thus a common label necessary.

In this paper I have suggested that the label 'First Nations' has started to become an all inclusive high frequency term in Native discourse. It is used strategically to unify diverse Native nations and at the same time to separate the Aboriginal population from the rest of Canadian society. Representing themselves as 'First Nations' asserts autonomy and rein-

forces and promotes the notion that Aboriginal people were not only distinct nations but also the first on Turtle Island (Canada). This leads me to a last point.

The concept of the 'nation' is a European or Western one describing a Western view of a political, cultural and economic entity. Using this term to describe traditionally clan and family oriented societies is one attempt of First Nations people to negotiate their way into the Canadian (political) consciousness. This appropriation of a non-Native concept to achieve Native ends, namely to reaffirm their identities can be problematic as Hedican (1995:212) observes: "The more the identity is reaffirmed in the public's mind, the more it is also brought into question." Irwin (1996) writes in an internet discussion that the use of the term First Nations in Canada is "problematic" as it refers to a concept which originated in Western philosophy. He continues, "Especially since it is suggested this is an important aspect of cultural preservation. Anybody else see this as somewhat ironic?" There is not much irony in it since the claim to nationhood and therefore the appropriation of a European concept is the result of socio-political circumstances which force First Nations to use a foreign system of representation. It is not a completely satisfactory one but the only one the external political rhetoric offers. As John Moses, a Mohawk and Native history researcher, brings to mind, "when speaking in English to mainstream Euro-North Americans the word 'nation' happens to come closest to capturing that sense of unity and common identity, shared among a group of Native people all coming from specific Native communities" (personal communication). And Mercredi and Turpel (1993:6-7) note: "The expression First Nations [...] captures how we see things: the first peoples who are organized in nations. The expression 'nations' is not used in the sense of nation-states, but rather as distinct political and cultural communities."

In constructing a unified and unifying nation, First Nations are also claiming a kind of comparability to the nation of Canada. They must locate themselves within another nation and must speak its political language to achieve their goals. They are not, in fact a nation like Canada, that is, a political and economic entity controlling a specific territory. However, this is exactly what First Nations are claiming for themselves: the right to political identity and autonomy as a people, together with the control of some territory. Discursively constructing a national identity with the unifying term 'First Nation(s)' is one tool to transform the status quo. Using this label is a sign of a change that has already taken place and it will progress whether it is recognized (and accepted) slowly or quickly by the dominant society.

### Notes

1. I use the term 'Indian' in this paper when I refer to the constructed image of the Indian, the hegemonic notion, which is primarily negative and derogatory. Otherwise I use the preferred terms First Nations, Aboriginal and Native people.
2. This term was coined in the eighteenth century by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his essay *The Social Contract* (1762). He assumed that in a natural state, man is innocent and uncorrupted because there has been no contact with the complexities and compromises of society. The 'Noble Savage' is living in nature according to nature's own benevolent laws.
3. In *The Imaginary Indian* (1992), Daniel Francis proclaimed that the image of the Indian was solely based on the imagination of the early European colonizers and that these images have had consequences in the real world: "In their relations with Native people over the years, non-Native Canadians have put the image of the Indian into practice. They have assumed that the Imaginary Indian was real [...]. And they have devised public policy based on that assumption." (p. 194)
4. An event that drove home the gravity of Native land rights and sovereignty were the confrontations at Ipperwash Park / Stoney Point in September 1995 where Dudley George, a Native man from the Stoney Point First Nation, was shot by a police officer. This land claim dispute goes back to 1942 when the federal government expropriated land belonging to the Stoney Point First Nation under the War Measures Act in order to build a military camp – Camp Ipperwash. In the years to follow, the First Nation community tried to get the land back—as was promised by the federal government—claiming it contained a sacred burial ground destroyed when the camp was built. However, the government never made an attempt to return the land to the Aboriginal people and thus in 1993 community members began moving back onto the land without any official agreements. When another group of Stoney Pointers marched onto the base in 1995, the military finally withdrew. It was then that Dudley George, one of about thirty Native people, who peacefully occupied Ipperwash Park to protest the destruction of their burial ground and a fifty-year delay in returning their tribal lands, was killed by one of the forty Ontario Provincial Police officers.
5. Although the term 'Indian' is nowadays not acceptable anymore due to its pejorative connotations, it has a rather specific definition in Canadian law, i.e. only Native people who are specified as Status

Indians under the Indian Act have special rights, as opposed to non-Status Indians. Being legally defined as 'Non-Status Indians' does not mean that these First Nations people are less 'Indian.' On the contrary, many Aboriginal people in this category may exhibit all the social, cultural, communal and personal values and beliefs of 'Nativity.' However, they are not defined as 'Indians' in the legal sense, i.e. as registered Indians, because their ancestors refused, or were not allowed, to make agreements with the Crown or because they lost Indian status.

6. The 'two founding nations' paradigm of Canadian history is still taught in schools and therefore a concern for Native people with regard to the education of their children. The following, an excerpt from an interview I conducted with Karen Roach, Haudenosaunee, exemplifies this:

KR: The difference is written by our own people. Our people were taught in the Residential Schools a version of history that was not our own. [...] And that's absolutely a concern, because my son will be learning about the TWO founding nations next year.

SR: What are you going to do?

KR: I don't know yet. I'm preparing a year ahead of time to think how I need to address that and is it just a matter of me teaching him our history at home? Do I need to use this form to make a point? How much of a point do I need to make? And does this involve maybe getting one of our Elders to go into the class and do that, so you have that to counteract. You know, I'm thinking of that, when my son needs to write a report of the two founding nations, maybe I'm going to write a grade six report called 'The Nations that were here when the two founding nations showed up' and send it to school with him. Just to kind of raise the awareness of the teacher. So, it's strategizing and how do you plan to do this in a respectful way, but just to say, hey, this is not how we see the world.

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