

ABORIGINAL IDENTITY, MISREPRESENTATION, AND DEPENDENCE: A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

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Abstract / Résumé

This critical analysis of the literature of the past 30 years accentuates the overt and subtle discourses that strike at the core of Aboriginals' appeals to unearth the underlying tangents of mainstream dominance over their linguistic and cultural traditions. Three issues emerge from the literature review and include: (i) there exists varied perceptions of Aboriginal identity in the discourses; (ii) Aboriginal educational paradigms are misrepresented by Eurocentric scholarship, and (iii) the various Aboriginal points of view within the interplay of documents are situated from positions of disadvantage and hence are purposefully degraded by governing mainstream positions.

La présente analyse critique de la documentation publiée au cours des trente dernières années met l'accent sur les discours officiels et subtils qui veulent neutraliser des appels des Autochtones en vue de déterrer les éléments sous-jacents de la domination de leurs traditions linguistiques et culturelles. Trois questions émergent de l'examen de la documentation : i) les discours présentent des perceptions variées de l'identité autochtone, ii) les paradigmes éducatifs des Autochtones sont dénaturés par les recherches universitaires eurocentriques et iii) les divers points de vue des Autochtones présentés dans l'action réciproque des documents occupent des positions désavantageuses et sont donc volontairement dégradés par les positions directrices dominantes.

Introduction

The wide-ranging impediments to the entitlements of Aboriginal peoples in Canada have been extensively identified by numerous scholars, government reports, and Aboriginal organizations, particularly in the past 30 years (Assembly of First Nations, 1990; Battiste, 1997; Minister of Indian Affairs, 1997; Womack, 1999). According to Battiste (2002), the challenge is to “sensitize the Western consciousness of Canadians in general...to the colonial and neo-colonial practices that continue to marginalize and racialize” the unique character, rights, and relationships of Aboriginal peoples (9). It is also suggested that mainstream Canadian society recognize the fact that Aboriginal epistemologies have been largely ignored in the mainstream, and perhaps more significantly, account for the inequities inherent in power relationships between themselves and Aboriginal peoples (Neegan, 2005). It is, according to some scholars, an imbalance of power that consistently renders Aboriginal peoples in Canada into lower income brackets, higher unemployment and school drop-out categories, and a disproportionate dependency upon social welfare programs in comparison to mainstream Canadian society (Neegan, 2007; Satzewich, 1991). The situation is comparable to the plight of American Indians who also represent the highest dropout rates and the lowest college admissions (American Council on Education, 2002; Beaulieu, 2000; Butterfield, 1994). Furthermore, Aboriginal knowledge orientations are not readily represented in mainstream research and scholarship literature that is characteristic of Eurocentric paradigms (Iseke-Barnes, 2002; see also, Cajete, 1994; Castellano, 1997; Die, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine 2000; Tedla, 1992).

A literature review of various seminal documents, as discussed in the subsequent pages, speak to the entitlements of Aboriginal peoples spanning from 1972 to 2002 and attest to the fact that their language, cultural, and educational rights in Canada have been extensively referenced and comprehensively defined (Elijah, 2002). Aboriginal peoples have repeatedly argued for the redirection of these entitlements from the reigning cultural and mainstream Canadian political control; yet, policy makers and political authorities have been seemingly non-committal in their recognition of Aboriginal requests. Among the objectives of this critical analysis of the literature that spans 30 years is to accentuate the overt and subtle discourse that strikes at the core of Aboriginal peoples' appeal to unearth the underlying tangents of mainstream dominance over their linguistic and cultural traditions. The intent is not to qualify a literature review of Aboriginal knowledge given that such wisdom generally rests in the experiences and teachings of Aboriginal peoples (Battiste, 2002). Emerging from this critical pedagogical interrogation of

various landmark documents are three distinct but interrelated issues that expound upon a detailed cultural and historical milieu. The issues include: (i) the perception and value of Aboriginal identity, while recognized by both Aboriginal scholars and the political mainstream, is articulated in the documents from considerably different points of view; (ii) the misrepresentation of Aboriginal knowledge and educational paradigms by Eurocentric scholarship, and (iii) the various Aboriginal points of view within the interplay of documents are situated from positions of disadvantage and hence are purposefully degraded by governing mainstream positions.

Aboriginal Identity from Competing Perspectives

To begin, Aboriginal identity is considered in the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) as integral to their ancestral Native image. Aboriginal peoples claim that educational experiences for school-aged children should reflect Indian values. Language, too, is critical to cultural education and to sustaining traditional beliefs and Indigenous Knowledge. The official teaching of Aboriginal language to Aboriginal students was deemed critical towards defining and appreciating Aboriginal self-identity. Similar appeals to reinstate and recognize Aboriginal identity were tabled by Aboriginal self-interest groups at the Assembly of First Nations (1988; 1990; 1994) and the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centers (2000).

Consider, then, the International Covenant of Political and Civil Rights (1976) that typified the Canadian governmental response in stipulating that no persons of minority would be prohibited from engaging in cultural and linguistic traditions as Canadian citizens (Article 27). The Constitution Act (1982), the Report of the Royal Commission (1995), and Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan (1997) supported the protection of Aboriginal cultural identity. Markedly different, however, is the shift of language in contemporary political releases. Desautels (2000), as the Auditor General of Canada, cited the urgency for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) to reinstate Native identity through the formal education of Aboriginal children attending reserve schools at the peril of "high financial cost in social programs [and] a waste of human capital" (n.p.). The situation was deemed urgent by the Auditor General given the impending expenditures that were predicted to be necessary to amend the impending crisis. Such a sense of urgency was, however, dubiously absent from political responses to similar pleas by Aboriginal groups for at least the previous 30 years. Note particularly the inferences in Desautels' response that couches the loss of Aboriginal identity in capitalist frames of reference that further marginalize Ab-

original peoples from the mainstream. The repeated calls by Aboriginal stakeholders to reclaim their cultural and linguistic identity is translated and underscored in economic terms that best represent corporate and private interests and therein further alienate an already marginalized minority in their native land (Giroux, 2005; Giroux & Giroux, 2006).

Two years later Nault (2002), the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, issued a political release that proposed, "investing in First Nation's education is an investment in the economic future of First Nations communities" (n.p.). While the Minister's intention may have been to identify formal schooling as a means to address the disproportionate drop-out rates of Aboriginal adolescents in Canada, as specified in the Auditor General's Report (2000; Section 4.43), the neo-liberal connotation inherent in the government document is incongruent with Aboriginal values and hence disconnected from the very cultural identity from which their arguments are based. The impending fragmentation from both a symbolic and pedagogical perspective serves to embed the power inequities between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream politics.

Consider as well that culture itself, from a broader perspective, rests in the potential for "linking politics to matters of individual and social agency as they are lived out in particular democratic spheres, institutional forms and communities in process" (Giroux, 2004b, 78; Bourdieu, 1998). The concept of agency, in light of Aboriginal peoples' attempt to underscore their distinct identity, is undermined by a political recognition that essentially seems to legitimize certain exclusions (Giroux, 2004b). More specifically, political discursive stances symbolic of capitalist value systems serve only to remind Aboriginal peoples that their paradigms of schooling and educational institutions, once assaulted and suppressed by Eurocentric interests that were bent on "civilizing" Aboriginal children (Grande, 2004; Szask, 1999; Reyhner & Eder, 1989), are in fact dominated by mainstream social practices (Dieter-Meyer, 2006; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Immergut, 1998; Ingram & Clay, 2000). There exists, then, what can be described as competing and opposing discourses between Aboriginal peoples' symbolic dimension of identity and the capitalist interpretation of commodifying identity that represent official government reports and releases.

Of tremendous significance, it can be suggested that the inequity in the balance of power that characterizes these discursive exchanges augments the displacement of the Aboriginal psyche from the mainstream Canadian public discourse (Duggan, 2003; Giroux, 2004b). In turn, this displaced Aboriginal psyche is ostracized from a concept of identity that, according to mainstream political perspectives, does not account for the value of individual diversity. This is reminiscent of Giroux's

(1992) theory of linguistic privilege whereby language perpetuates “a populist elitism” that hinders the translation between minorities, individuals and popular cultural stances (220; see also, Crowley, 1989; Giroux, 2003; 2004a; Tourmaline, 2001). By situating the concerns, privileges, and rights of Aboriginal peoples outside the mainstream political discourse, Giroux’s oxymoronic notion of populist elitism is allowed to thrive. Characteristic of these frames of references are vague and often irrelevant references to the desired outcomes and critical questions identified by a marginalized Aboriginal peoples in quest of reclaiming their cultural, symbolic, and epistemic space. By relegating their attempts to the reclamation of their very identity as Aboriginal peoples to the political margins, the dominant public perception is essentially sheltered from these competing worldviews. Consistent in the literature review is the notion that the conceptual justifications for Aboriginal identity evoke a significant different understanding from mainstream politics. The inferences relating to the posturing throughout the documents between Aboriginal and political stakeholders produce varied and disjointed characterizations.

Aboriginal Knowledge and Education

The claims to recognize and celebrate Aboriginal knowledge as a distinct entity by Eurocentric scholarship, like language and culture, are also prevalent and woven throughout the literature. Aboriginal scholars have sought a separate intellectual niche to distinguish themselves from colonial paradigms of teaching, learning and schooling (Battiste, 2002; Hill, 2000; Kawagley, 1995; Womack, 1999). Aboriginal knowledge is specific to people and place and is shared, often through story, from one generation to the next:

In forcing assimilation and acculturation to Eurocentric knowledge, modern governments and educational systems have displaced Indigenous knowledge. It is clear, however, that the exclusive use of Eurocentric knowledge in education has failed First Nations children. (Battiste, 2002: 9; see also Ascher, 1991; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003)

Mainstream Eurocentric scholarship has misrepresented Aboriginal knowledge by labeling it as static and outdated. Eurocentric scholarship does not embed the principles of Aboriginal learning as a holistic and experiential process grounded in Native linguistic and cultural tradition (Neegan, 2007). Instead, it classifies knowledge into hierarchal skills and aptitudes (Kirkness, 2003). According to Battiste (2002),

In this taxonomic approach, it is the categorizer who decides whether a teaching...or practice is Indigenous and

unique to a given heritage or society, adopted from Eurocentric knowledge, or a blend of local and introduced components. Using these taxonomic studies, Eurocentric scholars provided definitions of Indigenous knowledge based on their partial framework, methodologies, and perspectives. Much effort was expended highlighting the differences between Eurocentric and Indigenous knowledge in terms of their respective ideological underpinnings, substance, methods, and so forth. In the literature, these differences were highlighted by underscoring the superiority of Eurocentric knowledge and its classifications and the inferiority of Indigenous knowledge. (11)

Education, from an Aboriginal perspective, is entrenched within linguistic and cultural traditions. Aboriginal peoples advocate for school and schooling practices for Aboriginal children that are founded upon and directed by Aboriginal educators who could ensure that language and culture serve as the primary means for the cross-generational transferring of knowledge to communicate Aboriginal peoples' collective experiences (Burnaby, 1996; Elijah, 2002; Fishman, 2001). Within these conflicting paradigms of knowledge and scholarship rests a profound implication for Aboriginal peoples given the contemporary practices to measuring Aboriginal student learning in Canada. By not accounting for the social, economic, and political factors that influence Aboriginal student learning, and by not accounting for the holistic and experiential approach of Aboriginal learning, the outcomes position Aboriginal students in a disadvantaged position and portray them through a "deficit lens" that includes lower achievement scores, high absenteeism, and disproportionate drop-out rates in comparison to mainstream students (Neegan, 2007, 8; see also Métis National Council, 2007; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Lifelong Learning, 2004).

Aboriginal peoples make the argument that education is paramount to the survival and welfare of linguistic and cultural traditions in Canada. Captured throughout the documents in the last 30 years is Aboriginal leaders' determination to reclaim jurisdiction for their systems of education from the federal Canadian government. These efforts have produced Aboriginal funding agreements, programming, and curricula that speak to Aboriginal value systems. In light of chronic shortages and difficulties in retaining teachers for Aboriginal language instruction and Native studies (Minister of Indian Affairs, 1997; RCAP, 1996), a significant achievement has been the partnerships with universities to create Native Teacher Education Programs (NTEP) that provide certification for Aboriginal teachers. These programs are responsive to Aboriginal perspectives, and ac-

knowledge that the respective linguistic and cultural traditions are best sustained by educational experiences founded upon Aboriginal value systems (Kavanaugh, 2005; Elijah, 2002; Cohen, 2001; Corbiere, 2000; Kirkness, 1999; National Indian Brotherhood, 1988; RCAP, 1996). They also recognize the centrality of language and culture as conduits for the passing of traditional heritage and the fostering of Aboriginal peoples' collective experiences (Edwards, 2005; Elijah, 2002; RCAP, 1996). Yet, Grande (2004) triggers the operative question in Aboriginal peoples' attempts to reclaim their schooling: "how can schools—which are deeply embedded in the exhaustive history of colonization—be re-imagined as states of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination?" (47)

Aboriginal communities have been candid in identifying the obstacles in hiring and retaining Aboriginal teachers (Morgan, 2002; Alfred, 1999). Despite the Auditor General's Report (2000) that stressed the necessity to improve teacher preparation programs and account for maintaining and revitalizing Aboriginal languages, there seems to be little evidence that such recommendations have in fact been implemented (Minister of Indian Affairs, 2000; Keeshig-Tobias, 1990; Littlebear, 1999).

The Disequilibrium of Power Discourses

Also emerging from an analysis of the literature consisting of Aboriginal recommendations and federal government documents is a competing and highly sensitive disequilibrium within the forums of culture and politics. More specifically, as far back as 1972 (as referenced in *The Indian Control of Indian Education – National Indian Brotherhood*) Aboriginal peoples' identified their need for cultural education centers to assist in sustaining their communities with traditional beliefs within Canadian society. In 1988 Aboriginals reiterated the claim that their languages are deserving of official status in Canada and that the "Federal government is obligated to provide adequate resources to First Nations to ensure the development of language structures" (Assembly of First Nations). As self-advocates for their collective voice, Aboriginals employed a concise, non-convoluted syntax in stating a series of emphatic truths. Their cultural and political points of view were made clear. In 1996, Aboriginal authors used the medium of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to underscore the multiple significations upon their cultural experiences and traditions of having been the objects of attempts by state and church authorities to use education to control and assimilate them in both the past and the present. The same report makes the intuitive claim that Aboriginal people are asking for no more than what other communities already have (see volume 3). Within the texts of the above-named discourses, to name only a few, their identity as a

distinct Native peoples was thoughtfully articulated and unmistakably presented.

Given these frames of reference, however, in “asking” and “requesting” that the mainstream government and dominant culture grant them what they consider to be fundamental rights, the language itself is paradoxically mobilized against Aboriginal self-interest since it further entrenches the political and cultural “divide that separates dominant from subordinate groups” (Giroux & McLaren, 1992: 7; see also, McLaren, 1988). In these contexts, Aboriginal voices are framed as requests that stem from positions of forced dependence. Ironically, the historical and contemporary truths of mainstream educational, political, and cultural institutions that have largely dominated and ignored Aboriginal tradition forces them to cite the blatant reality of low-achieving students, high drop-out rates, and minimal successes in mainstream North American economy to justify their requests to the governing political and dominant culture. The perils of their disappearing Aboriginal worldviews, cultural heritage, and very identity are unexaggeratedly stated within the documents, while the import of their pleas is substantiated by numerous studies that preceded the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Assembly of First Nations, 1988; Assembly of First Nations Language and Literacy Secretariat, 1994; Battiste, 2002). In many ways Aboriginal voices, given these frames of reference, are typified from a disadvantaged social position. It should be noted as well that the American historical stage reflected such morally repressive colonial practices. One need only audit the 1790 United States Census wherein American Indians were tallied as animals. Just as the discursive control is driven by a disenchanting historical past that undermined their linguistic and cultural identities, so too mainstream discursive traditions preserve a selective mainstream perspective, fracture Aboriginal agency, and perpetuate what critical pedagogists characterize as “the struggle with ongoing relations of power” (Giroux, 2004b: 86).

Considering these positions of imposed disadvantage and forced dependence, the literature further attests to the selective political responses and initiatives that represent something of a consolation to Aboriginal concerns. An analysis of the literature suggests that the documents are re-presentations of the respective stakeholder voices that concede the interrelated posturing from both the Aboriginal and mainstream government perspectives. Consider the following landmark documents as examples: The Constitution Act (1982) recognized Aboriginal rights, but made no commitment to binding conventions or to the educational provisions tabled by Aboriginal peoples (Elijah, 2002). The First Minister’s Conference (1984) proposed to recognize, preserve, and ad-

vance Aboriginal cultural heritage, as well as to educate school-aged children in Native languages. The Report of the Royal Commission (1996) recommended that negotiations between the federal government of Canada and First Nations continue to strive for Aboriginal self-governance as far as education is concerned. These landmark political responses, among others, employ a discourse to suggest that first, substantial progress was made in terms of Aboriginal requests and second, that future objectives will be realized. The political flavor inherent in the discourse implies a reasonable and conciliatory mainstream government. It suggests a political willingness to engage in continued discussion with the significant Aboriginal stakeholders to recognize their interests and empathize with their emotional appeals for greater control over their educational system and greater jurisdiction to sustain their cultural and linguistic traditions. The reports position the government in the role of a collaborative partner, albeit the one who clearly holds / yields the power and authority to ultimately decide on any course of action. Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan (1997), authored by the office of the Minister of Indian Affairs on behalf of the Canadian federal government, stated their intent to "work to help preserve Aboriginal languages" and their recognition that an improved future for Aboriginal people depended upon "providing a better future" for Aboriginal students. Hurley and Wherrett (2000), as authors of a commentary on the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, candidly chastise the government for their inadequate and slow response to the recommendations from the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples and their lack of respect for the urgency of Aboriginal requests. Elijah (2002) recognizes both an overt commitment by the federal government to improving the conditions of living for Aboriginals, in conclusive and deliberate language, and the lack of meaningful, enduring, and systemic interventions. The language of the government responses, framed from the self-appointed position of *provider*, situates them in a position of interpretive and evaluative power. Take, as an example, the Minister of Indian Affairs (1995) policy entitled, *Federal Policy Guide: Aboriginal Self-Government*. While it is true that its situated intent was to establish agreements between mainstream government and First Nations rights of self-government, it was the federal government that dictated the categories for negotiations. The federal government, accordingly, articulated the principles from which the policy of Aboriginal self-government is based. As Morgan (2002) notes, Aboriginal peoples have inherent rights of self-government that need not be granted, conceded, and / or imparted by another government body. The right is in fact an extension of Aboriginal peoples' self-governing collective as it existed when the imperial presence emerged on the land.

The larger social issues are easily relegated to the margins given these different attributions of meaning throughout the discourse.

Particularly noteworthy in the discursive frameworks of Native recommendations and government reports are the emergent social structures that constitute the competing power relations. The re-presentation of voice underscores the lack of Aboriginal agency as a result of being unjustly forced to advocate from a position of dependency. As a minority group, therefore, they are relegated to the role of dependent and are required to seek permission from the dominant political stakeholder in frames of references that further position them to the margins of mainstream Canadian society (see, for example, Giroux, 1992). Aboriginal peoples' collective agency and identity materialize, quite ironically, within the same discourse that positions them in a state of dependency upon the dominant political governance. The frames of reference, hence, establish "an ideologically discursive divide" between minority and majority positions; in this predicament, between Aboriginal agency and political rule (Giroux & McLaren, 1992: 7). As another example, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's (INAC) published a document entitled, *First Nations Education Data Collection Profiles* (2004) that was an extension of the Education Data Collection Review also initiated in 2004. To put it in context, the Report of the Auditor-General of Canada (2002) along with the self-identified commitment from the federal government to improve reporting, resulted in a thorough review and "critical assessment" of the data collected from Aboriginal peoples in both regional and national forums. Yet, as it is stated in the Executive Summary of the *First Nations Education Data Collection Profiles*, "First Nations were not directly consulted." Although INAC articulated their intent to share the findings of the report with First Nations as an outcome of the research, the very people being investigated and *critically assessed* were excluded from the process. Positions of power, social agency, and cultural norms are inequitably factored within these processes and subsequent discourses. This is to substantiate the view that Canadian mainstream society in general has "failed to develop a comprehensive understanding of language, identity, and experience and their relation to the broader power-sensitive discourses of power, democracy, social justice, and historical memory" (Giroux & McLaren, 1992: 8).

Recommendations

An examination of the literature suggests that the discursive frames of both past and present have failed Aboriginal peoples' drive to reclaim their identity and unique cultural and linguistic traditions within the mainstream Canadian context. Of prime importance, then, is the need to draw

upon the literature that

animates the fundamental theory and methods of Indigenous knowledge as a means to accord its protection and to raise its social value and its status as a system of knowledge, while Indigenous scholars generate the necessary intellectual space to create a conceptual and analytical framework for its development. (Battiste, 2002: 6; see also, Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000; Cajete, 1994; 2000; Kawagley, 2001)

As a second recommendation, there needs to be a heightened level of awareness among mainstream Canadians regarding Aboriginal languages and cultural traditions for the ancestral and historical value it represents to Canada (see Burnaby, 1996). This begins with a fundamental belief and active commitment to recognize, celebrate and value Aboriginal identity on the part of the Canadian government. Federal and provincial policy makers must be receptive and heed the advice of Aboriginal stakeholders to enable interaction on a level that sustains proactive dialogue and positive outcomes that impact upon Aboriginal identity and social and political agency (see Archibald et al., 2002).

Third, Aboriginal educational policies and practices need to directly involve First Nations communities (see Burns, 1997; Neegan, 2005). In this context, Aboriginal peoples will determine the most effective means of instilling worldviews into the core pedagogy of their schools and, in the process, enculturate Aboriginal students into their unique heritage. For this to occur, however, the dominant political governance must rectify the power imbalance that currently exists and serves to disconnect the Aboriginal psyche from the mainstream. The educational experience for Aboriginal students and the inclusion of culturally-sensitive resources need to be brought to fruition in a spirit of collaborative partnership (Johns & Sanders, 2005). All stakeholders have to situate power relations, both as symbols and discourses, in equitable social, cultural, and historical paradigms (Sonn, 2004) to counter the subordinate positions Aboriginal peoples have historically been relegated to within mainstream Canadian society (Satzewich, 1991).

Last, band leaders, tribal councils, and distinguished Elders should work actively and collaboratively with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, other federal agencies, and ministries of education to promote the ideals and positive outcomes of credible pedagogical practices and educational systems that are responsive to the Aboriginal linguistic and cultural traditions that, in turn, sustain Aboriginal identity. For this to occur Aboriginal agency in both cultural and political realms cannot be determinately ambiguous; in fact, their discursive points of view cannot ema-

nate from positions of dependency and hence be inescapably resigned to positions of disadvantage.

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