

**You Can't Be the Doctor If You're the Disease
Eurocentrism and Indigenous Renaissance**

by

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CAUT Distinguished Academic Lecture

April 26, 2013

In the Mi'kmaw tradition, the honouring of one member is an honour for our entire Nation. I begin by accepting this honour on our behalf and by thanking my nominator's support for putting forward this nomination and the Canadian Association of University Teachers for awarding me this prestigious honour. I also acknowledge the ancestral and traditional lands of the Algonkian on whose lands we are located. Wela'liek.

In 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations enacted The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that presented the world with a shared vision. It was a vision that developed over thirty years by Indigenous peoples and the nation states to remedy the five hundred years of bias, prejudice, racism, discrimination, and violence against Indigenous Peoples. It took some time for Canada (and other settler states) to put aside their resistances to this global vision and finally ratify this Declaration as an aspirational law. Recognizing those basic rights was a 25 years struggle for Indigenous leaders and activists like Grand Keptin Alex Denny, George Manuel, Harold Cardinal, Wilton Littlechild and many others in Canada and throughout the Indigenous world. This

struggle shaped a renaissance, a vital energizing force for forging our merged determination around these collective rights. It also was led to a renaissance of spirit and we have been engaging it to help each other and heal from the past. This declaration may now be seen as a starting point for a long-delayed but necessary process for dialogue and a just construction of globalization and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in all aspects of society, but most importantly through higher education.

In this lecture today, I would like to share an area of my decolonizing scholarship and activism to raise attention to the generation of the Indigenous renaissance, the learning spirit, the foundations of Indigenous knowledge systems and the need for constitutional reconciliation from the Eurocentric institutions that have marginalized Indigenous knowledge systems. All Indigenous communities are in recovery today from a deep colonizing culture of superiority and racism, and while there are new emergent forms of that coming back, Indigenous peoples are now reconciling with what was denied us, our knowledges and languages that leads us to the deep truths about ourselves and our connections with all things.

I am a treaty beneficiary of several treaty relationships-- the treaties of 1752, and 1760-1761 establish my peoples', the Mi'kmaw Nation, relationship with the King of Great Britain and permitted the lawful

settlement of our traditional territories by English and French subjects in what is now called Atlantic Canada. I am a treaty beneficiary of the Treaty of 1776 with the United States of American and the Mi'kmaq Nation. I am a federally recognized member of the Potlo'tek First Nations and also a member of a federally recognized band of Aroostook Micmac in the State of Maine.

During the 60s in Maine, Mi'kmaq and First Nations peoples were evolving from a generation characterized by struggle and resilience at best. My own family's choices characterized that struggle. They were uneducated in the formal systems of Eurocentric education, unemployed or underemployed most of the time, but hard working, and thoroughly richly learned in Mi'kmaw language, knowledge, and skills that extended from Cape Breton Island to Newfoundland to New England. When the federal government enacted a policy relocating my nation from their self sustaining lands to relocate on centralized reserves in Eskasoni and Shubenacadie under its notorious centralization policy, my parents followed many others in 1948 who began a back and forth journey from their ancestral community of Potlotek to Maine and Boston to make a life outside of Indian Affairs' dictates and abuses.

The Indian Residential School was looming large, and my own family only partially escaped it. Education in those schools was a tool for the

elimination of the Mi'kmaw consciousness and the language that fostered it. I call this process cognitive imperialism; others called it colonial Eurocentrism. My father's sisters and brother were sent to the Shubenacadie Residential School, and later my sister would spend three years there. Residential schools tainted most Aboriginal peoples' views of education, causing layers of trauma and cycles of emotionally lost youth and nihilism.

My father did not attend residential school, having been pulled out of school to help support his family at the age of 10 years old, but he had always a good feeling for what education might provide and encouraged me and my siblings. His own skills were drawn from his living and surviving from the land and how it provided for Mi'kmaq through the centuries. For the better part of my educational years in the school in rural Maine, in the border town of Houlton, my family survived on their Mi'kmaw knowledge and skills. My dad, 'Big John' developed his livelihood under the 1776 Treaty by his strength, working in the potato houses or woods and we lived in the migrant labour camps usually at the edge of the woods. When strapped for additional cash, my father and mother Annie made baskets of all kinds, axehandles, and other hardwood crafts to enrich our living. My mother practiced the ancestral traditions of her ancestors, making fancy Mi'kmaw baskets of all colors, sizes and functions, a skill then common to all Mi'kmaw families. All

members of my own family, depending on our age and capabilities, took on parts of that family work, learning how to make the varied products from ash and maple and living within our beloved woodlands to make being Mi'kmaq a largely creative enterprise. The benefits extended beyond the knowledge of the creative arts, for as my mother worked, she talked about her life and experiences, and we did not know then how blessed we were to learn about the deep family histories of resilience, creativity, humour and knowledge embedded in the ecology. She knew little within English language, so my life has been doubly enriched by the bilingual language and ecological communities that I have lived in and another knowledge system that I have come to know.

As I first entered into the teaching profession, my acquired formal education gave me little knowledge of the deep shared colonial trauma that was felt worldwide, as my own research would reveal. At the time my greatest pursuits lay outside of the educational system—the human rights movement, the civil rights movement, the feminist and Indian rights movement and my own community work— were to reveal the limitations of my formal education and accentuated the inequities and Eurocentric assimilating education that had failed so many of my people. The discourses of difference and inequality in social theory inspired me to begin to comprehend Eurocentrism not as an enriched tool to pass on to disadvantaged youth, but rather as a critique of the historical colonial

hegemony that Elizabeth Minnich (1990) called hierarchal invidious monoism. The assumptions and operating compelling ideologies fed normativity and normalcy of racism, inequities and poverty, and it fed my emerging learning spirit. By the time I reached graduate studies at Harvard, I was swept up with the narratives of change, for equality and for empowering the marginalized. While the feminist and Black movements held much supporting allied work, it was the Native American story of dispossession of their lands, the losses to their sovereignty and stewardship of those lands, and the losses through education to their language and knowledge bases that built my scholarly work.

To understand why Indigenous knowledge was ignored or marginalized in the colonial educational curricula was first to unravel Eurocentrism, something that each of us despite the school we attended have been marinated in. Eurocentrism is not just an opinion or attitude that can be changed by some multicultural or cross-cultural exercise, for Eurocentrism is a contrived foundation of all dominant scholarship, law, media, consciousness and structure of contemporary life. Eurocentrism is an ultra-theory in modern thought. It is the context for many smaller historical, geographical, psychological, sociological, and philosophical theories, all of which can be seen as integral parts of Eurocentric diffusionism. Diffusionism in its classic form as articulated by Blaut

(1993) that depicts a world divided into two categories. One category (Greater Europe, the Inside) is historical, invents, and progresses; the other category (non-Europe, the Outside) is ahistorical, stagnant and unchanging, and receives progressive innovations by diffusion from Europe. The reason for non-Europe's non-progress is a seeming lack of the Eurocentric intellectual or spiritual factor.

Universality is one aspect of Eurocentric diffusionism. The claim of universality underpinned cultural and cognitive imperialism, which established Eurocentric knowledge, experience, culture, and language as the norm for education, and in particular higher education. It justified the required Western civilization core course I had to take because Eurocentric colonizers were the ideal model for humanity and carriers of superior culture and intelligence, as the course in additional Art and Art History would reveal. From this contrived universality their educational systems evolved to build foundations that replicate disciplinary knowledges, methodologies and institutions that are continuing Eurocentrism and superiority of knowledges. These systems have excluded, marginalized and diminished what remains of the Indigenous knowledges, judged those who have it uneducated, and shaped the beliefs around institutional and imaginative assumptions of colonization and modernism. Using the strategy of difference, these institutions have defined the scope of human competencies and deviancies, as well as the

authority to impose their tutelage — through education—over everyone seeking education, including Indigenous peoples (Battiste & Henderson, 2000).

Racism is intimately related to Eurocentrism and the colonial curricula. It was developed by the universities to demonstrate superiority. And even though it has been shown by science to be a false concept, racial typologies dominate everyone's consciousness. Albert Memmi (1963) has brilliantly identified four strategies of racism that was used to maintain colonial power over Indigenous peoples: (1) stressing real or imaginary differences between the racist and the victim; (2) assigning values to these differences, to the advantage of the racist and the detriment of the victim; (3) trying to make these values absolutes by generalizing from them and claiming that they are final; and (4) using these values to justify any present or possible aggression or privileges (186). This strategy has made it very difficult to eliminate the racial typologies and myth.

The Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) noted that while colonialism as an ideology is no longer formally acknowledged as a framework for Canada's Aboriginal peoples, demeaning and ethnocentric attitudes linger in current policies that purport to work on behalf of Aboriginal peoples. Although "false assumptions" are no

longer formally acknowledged, RCAP argued that they did not lessen their influence on contemporary policies or mitigate their capacity to generate modern variants (1:249, 252-53). Using sanctions and rewards to professors and funding research or donations to universities, corporations and government interests tie the education system to their own interests, using vague notions of “standards” and “public good” to control what counts as knowledge, using ranking ‘hierarchy’ of journals to what knowledge is diffused, and to whom and how they can benefit from it. Knowledge is no longer about truths, if ever it was, but about profit and buildings and infrastructures, and not about sustainability, common goods, and shared visions for building futures in which everyone benefits.

Discrimination is defined both internationally and nationally as any unfair treatment of, or denial of normal privileges to, persons because of their race, age, sex, nationality, or religion. When discrimination is effected through the machinery of the state, it can have devastating impacts, ranging from deep psychological scars to racial and cultural genocide. For victims of discrimination, it matters little whether the damage is inflicted by invidious state action or by the less obvious application of facile neutral rules. The impacts are the same. Not only should nations not practice discrimination themselves, they must also

identify ways in which they will protect their citizens from discrimination on both local and national levels.

As Dr. Erica Daes from Greece noted at the UNESCO Conference on Education in July 1999: “Displacing systemic discrimination against Indigenous peoples created and legitimized by the cognitive frameworks of imperialism and colonialism remains the subtle most crucial cultural challenge facing humanity. Meeting this responsibility is not just a problem for the colonized and the oppressed, but also rather the defining challenge for all peoples. It is the path to a shared and sustainable future for all peoples” (Daes 1999: 1).

My path as a teacher, a principal in First Nations schools, and later a professor in education within the academy is about finding ways to turn this situation around. By teaching anti-racism to teacher candidates as a first step, then teaching decolonizing theories and strategies to teacher candidates as a second step, and then teach Indigenous knowledge systems as a remedy to Eurocentrism as a third step. I have sought to ignite a different learning consciousness and spirit. In teaching these steps, my department has generated among these future teachers an awareness of how difference has been constructed in society, how Whiteness and Indians have been constructed and how benefit is shaped in schools that see neutrality, color blindness, and meritocracy as themes

for pushing out students. We seek not just the critique of the social constructions of knowledge but therapeutic methodologies for educators, not just for Indigenous peoples themselves but for all students, and in particular for the marginalized stigmatized youth who need to feel safe, free to be, to do and to belong.

Decolonization is not about rejecting all theory or research of Eurocentric or Western knowledge. It is about creating a new space where Indigenous peoples' knowledge, identity, and future is calculated into the global and contemporary equation, a concept of ethical space as described by Cree educator Willie Ermine (2007). This ethical space brings both Indigenous peoples and change agents from diverse institutions together, recognizing the histories, knowledges, and positions that might be negotiated to create new visionary trans-systemic changes.

To create a new inclusive learning environment, however, educational institutions in Canada need to reconcile diverse knowledge systems, both cognitively (by embracing these systems) and physically (by dealing with institutional and individual racism). Any educational framework for understanding or protecting particular perspectives of Indigenous knowledge must be contextual, decentralized, and respectful

of the linguistic categories, rules, and relationships unique to each knowledge system.

Thomas Berry, author of *The Dream of the Earth*, suggests:

It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story. (Berry in Suzuki 1997, 4)

Much in the same way that feminism led to the building blocks of equity and equality for empowering women, allies now known as 'indigenists' (Wilson, in press) are seeking to empower Indigenous peoples, their knowledges, their languages, and to build ethical spaces for shared dialogues. This enriching their presence and vitality in the academy, and making ethical respectful community based research a foundation for their growth and prosperity within Indigeneity are processes that advance not just the academies interests of the academy but Indigenous peoples as well. Not only must educators confront why Indigenous knowledge and its diverse ecological and social foundations have been marginalized or dismissed, but how to create decolonized institutions with theories and methodologies that are emanating from the voices, visions, and values of those groups these institutions seek to include.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit students make up a significant and growing demographic in Canada, a population that can be the source of strength for Canada. Since the 1970s, however, the anti-racism, decolonization agenda and Indian control of education have generated some measures of success among Indigenous students at all levels of the Canadian education system. However, it is still well below the Canadian average. Currently 61 to 69% of First Nations students are failing to graduate from high school. Only 9 percent of those graduates attend university and only 3 percent graduate. This is a small but growing mass.

What is it then that fosters a nourished learning spirit? Focused on therapeutic understandings, sensitivities and knowledge(s), this education has to address the lack of hope and resignation among Indigenous youth who drop out of school or who find a lack of inspiration, engagement, and identity formation within (and beyond) current first year's courses and Eurocentric disciplines (Hill 1999). Displacing conventional normative strategies and finding new ways of engaging Indigenous students' understandings of their heritages, humanities, and identities is not a well-defined strategy in the academy. Rather controlled distance with students, neutrality of subject matter, and silence of the lives of students hide Eurocentric domination.

Disengagement, lack of attendance, and nihilism illustrate their consequential resistance.

Having just seen yet another National Aboriginal Achievement Awards, now called Indspire, I witness each year in each individual awardee the confirmation of how education can help achieve the greatest potential of inspired and committed youth. I witness in each awardee the hope in education and the willingness to be moved by their own communities, their Elders, and their peoples' history, resilience, and knowledges. They inspire pride in us who watch, and joy in being Mi'kmaq, Cree, Dene, Inuit, or Métis and collectively connected to them. They offer narratives of hardships and struggle, but eventual accomplishments that enrich their learning. Characteristically, they also draw on their Indigenous knowledge, traditional values and skills learned in place, and they value the Elders committed to living close to the land and to the ancient and new skills developed within a certain ecology and place. These award shows fills me with appreciation for what still remains despite the years of colonial distress from the past colonial and traumatic experiences that have not been forgotten but faced with determination and commitment to the resilience they have in themselves and their knowledges.

A post-colonial framework cannot be constructed unless Indigenous people renew and reconstruct the principles underlying their own world

views, environments, languages, and forms of communication, and re-examine how all these elements combine to construct their humanity I have dealt with this process of reclamation in my recent publication *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* (2000). And they are doing so. Newly empowered Indigenous people and their non-Indigenous allies are providing critical frameworks for addressing these issues while acknowledging excellence through the proper valuing and respectful circulation of Indigenous knowledge across and beyond Eurocentric disciplines. Indigenous people are seeking to heal themselves, to reshape their contexts, and to effect reforms based on a complex arrangement of conscientization, resistance, and transformative action.

Canadian educational institutions are now poised to make changes within their institutions to support Aboriginal education building upon several catalytic awarenesses: 1) the rising population of Indigenous youth in Canada, twice the rate of Canadian average; 2) priority setting established among the provinces and territories that affects both public schooling and university education in advancing Aboriginal education as represented by the Canadian Council of Ministers of Education; and 3) the Accord on Indigenous Education of the Canadian Association of Deans of Education. Most institutions across Canada are now working within new strategic planning where Indigenous students and their success are being prioritized and implemented. Indigenous knowledge

systems are being gradually recognized within some disciplinary areas of Eurocentrism as well as professional disciplines.

The Supreme Court of Canada has stated that the aboriginal and treaty rights to education have to be reconciled with federal power over Indians and the provincial power over education. The avoidance of this significant constitutional reconciliation and relying on the status quo based only on Canada's legislation and policies has ushered in yet another movement among the youth and grassroots...Idle No More. This relatively new constitutional voice of the grassroots banner continues the struggle for constitutional reconciliation, supported by social media and Aboriginal organizations that enable people to bring people in conversation together.

In Canada, educational institutions have a pivotal responsibility in transforming relations between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society. Indigenous peoples believe in education, and RCAP reinforced that in one of the most comprehensive of research and policy studies in the last century. Despite their deep trauma with the British colonial history in Canada and beyond, Aboriginal peoples in Canada are committed to finding a path in and through education that will help lift their spirits, inspire their passions for their potential on this earth, and

the foundation of their livelihood that will nourish their learning spirits throughout their lifetime.

We as university professors and educators and administrators are facilitators of that growth and change of youth, in the subjects we teach, in the research we conduct, in the shared collegiality in supporting and enhancing the institutions in which we work, and in the publications we offer to the world about what all of that reveals to us. Indigenous knowledge and peoples have a place in their own Canada and their institutions. It is not about multiculturalism or ethnocentrism, but living up Canada's constitutional imperative in affirming aboriginal and treaty rights. It is also about the Courts recognition that when a right exists, it has a place in the hearts and homes and institutions of this nation. The search for Truth in the past no longer is what our institutions are about, for we have come to know that truths are dependent, subjective, and illusive. What we can aspire to achieve however remains in the human spirit for us to nourish and engage so that students may find their own truths, their own histories, their own voices, and their own inspiration for the changes this nation so clearly needs. The late Grand Keptin Alex Denny reminded me often: You can't be the doctor if you're the disease!

Finally, I extend my gratitude to CAUT for working toward education and social justice for all faculty and staff and for ensuring that the

necessary transformation in colleges and university are continued in the work that the organization and its staff do so passionately and so effectively. Wela'lin. Thank you.

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