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Finding a Place for Race at the Policy Table: Broadening the Indigenous education discourse in Canada

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January, 2010

Acknowledgements

This publication is part of the Aboriginal Policy Research Series, which focuses on public policy issues affecting Métis, non-status Indians, and other Aboriginal peoples residing off-reserve. The series is produced in a partnership between the Institute On Governance (IOG) and the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians (OFI).

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Abstract

A significant challenge facing those working in education today is the gap that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational achievement. With increasing globalization – the logics of which contribute to an ever-increasing number of Indigenous people living in cities across the country – educational attention is paid not only to improving the performance of Indigenous students in order that they might better participate in Canada’s economy but also to effectively managing the difference that Indigenous students represent in the context of schooling. To a large extent, the approach to addressing both the education gap and difference has been through a focus on culture. Prevalent in education research since the 1970’s, and in policy since the 1980’s, this focus on culture derives from two separate streams of thinking: a theory of cultural discontinuity and ideas related to liberal multiculturalism. In Canada, St. Denis & Schick have exposed problems associated with the manner in which culture has become the means for addressing educational inequities. They argue that important structural and ideological issues such as racism, which act as barriers to improving educational outcomes, are largely ignored.

Given the persistence of an educational achievement gap and the continuing prevalence of racism in the lives of Indigenous students, there is a compelling case for initiatives in public schools that would move away from what is largely a single-minded, often problematic focus on culture as the foundational approach to addressing all concerns in Indigenous education. Employing stagnant, simplified notions of culture to improve educational outcomes, an all too common occurrence, ignores how urban Indigenous youth themselves describe their school and place-based experiences. What is needed at this time is a critique of the way ‘culture’ and ‘cultural difference’ is currently constructed in public schools and related to this, an emphasis on policy measures that can deal much more directly with the issue of race. A renewed focus on exposing and tackling racism is intrinsic to not only achieving educational equity and the larger goal of educational decolonization, but also for re-conceptualizing curriculum and instruction based on alive, complex Indigenous philosophies.



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Finding a Place for Race at the Policy Table: Broadening the Indigenous education discourse in Canada

Introduction

Youth make up a significant segment of a burgeoning Indigenous¹ population in Canada, and associated with this, an increasing Indigenous presence in cities across the country.² In spite of this, the experience of Indigenous youth remains principally ignored in scholarly, and to an even greater extent, policy discourse. As evidenced in academic studies, policy papers, commission reports, etc., it is clear that this is a segment of Canadian society that continues to be challenged by racism both within and outside of the formal school setting. In a recent large-scale study in Ontario, an average 78% of respondents across five cities identified and described racism as a problem, leading writers of the report to argue that “Racism against Aboriginal people in Ontario is therefore widespread and systemic in that it functions effectively on many fronts to keep the poorer members of the Aboriginal community from achieving an adequate quality of life in the city.”³ Recent Census data shows that decreasingly, Indigenous people are living in rural, separate communities; a majority now lives in Canada’s fast expanding urban areas.⁴ Yet, this population shift has “not been matched by public policy successes.”⁵ In part, this is because neither the federal nor provincial governments wish to claim responsibility for dealing with the complexities of Indigenous peoples in urban areas; in particular, neither wishes to confront how issues of sovereignty may play out in the urban realm. But also important to this lack of public policy success is the racism that Indigenous peoples continue to experience, producing not only

¹ By *Indigenous*, I mean those diverse individuals and groups who make up the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, referred to by Sec. 35 (2) of the Constitution Act, 1982. This includes those who identify as *First Nation, Non-Status, Métis* and *Inuit*. In keeping with the language commonly used by Indigenous peoples themselves, I also use the term *Native* throughout the paper.

² According to the most recent Census, in 2006 54% of Canada’s Aboriginal people lived in urban areas, including large cities or census metropolitan areas and smaller urban centers, up from 50% in 1996. In 2006, Winnipeg was home to the largest urban Aboriginal population (68,380). Edmonton, with 52,100, had the second largest number of Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal population is younger than the non-Aboriginal population; almost half (48%) consists of children and youth aged 24 and under, compared with 31% of the non-Aboriginal population. The Aboriginal population in Canada, aged 0 to 14 years, is predicted to grow from 6% of all children in 2001, to over 7.4% in 2017 (see Margaret Michalowski, Shirley Loh, Ravi B.P. Verma, Marie-France Germain and Claude Grenier. *Projections of the Aboriginal populations: Canada, Provinces and Territories 2001 to 2017*. Catalogue no. 91-547-XIE. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2005).

³ Urban Aboriginal Task Force, *Urban Aboriginal Task Force: Final Report* (Ontario: Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association and Ontario Native Women’s Association, 2007), 23.

⁴ David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters make the point that when Aboriginal people move into cities often they are traveling within their traditional territories, “Introduction”, in David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters (Eds.), *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative, 2003).

⁵ Calvin Hanselmann, “Ensuring the Urban Dream: Shared Responsibility and Effective Urban Aboriginal Voices” David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters (eds.), *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative, 2003), 167-77. See also the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, “Education”, *Volume 3 - Gathering Strength* and “Perspectives and Realities”, *Volume 4 - Looking Forward Looking Back* (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996).

material but also psychological effects.⁶ This is a longstanding issue in the Canadian context yet racism continues to receive little or no direct attention in social and educational policy making.⁷

Comprehending race as neither biological fact nor illusion; rather, as “an unstable and “decentered” complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle,”⁸ race is a concept profoundly relevant for understanding a plethora of contemporary social issues affecting Native peoples such as youth homelessness,⁹ deep poverty among Aboriginal women and their children,¹⁰ youth suicide,¹¹ high rates of unemployment,¹² Aboriginal people’s health status,¹³ the incarceration and gang involvement of Native youth,¹⁴ and school drop out.¹⁵ A review of the literature describes the racism that Aboriginal students experience as complex: racism as curricular expression, as verbal and psychological abuse, as low expectations/self-fulfilling prophecy, as social marginalization and/or isolation, as denial of professional support and/or attention, and as rules and procedures to facilitate failure.¹⁶ St. Denis and Hampton highlight the effects of racism as resulting in limited opportunities for Aboriginal youth, and in

⁶ Verna St. Denis and Eber Hampton, *Literature Review on Racism and the Effects on Aboriginal Education* (Ottawa: Minister’s Working Group on Education, 2002).

⁷ An exception is 2005, when the Government of Canada unveiled *A Canada for All: Canada’s Action Plan Against Racism* (Gatineau: Canadian Heritage). The initiative, meant to combat racism, crosses a handful of federal government departments. No similar plan has been formulated by any of Canada’s provinces or territories.

⁸ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Inc. 1986), 68.

⁹ Debra Sider, *A Sociological Analysis of Root Causes of Aboriginal Homelessness in Sioux Lookout, Ontario* (Toronto: The Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2005).

¹⁰ Native Women’s Association of Canada. *Aboriginal Women and Homelessness: An Issue Paper* (Ottawa: Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2007). See also Mylène Jaccoud and Renée Brassard, “The Marginalization of Indigenous Women in Montreal”, David Newhouse & Evelyn Peters (eds.), *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative, 2003), 131-145.

¹¹ Laurence J. Kirmayer, Gregory M. Brass, Tara Holton, Ken Paul, Cori Simpson and Caroline Tait, *Suicide Among Aboriginal People in Canada* (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2007). See also Javier Mignone and John O’Neil, “Social Capital and Youth Suicide Risk Factors in First Nations Communities”, *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 96 (2005), S51-S54; Wesley Crichtlow, “Western Colonization as Disease: Native Adoption & Cultural Genocide”, *Critical Social Work*, 3, no. 1 (2003), 88-107.

¹² Jacqueline Luffman and Deborah Sussman, “The Aboriginal Labour Force in Western Canada”, *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (2007).

¹³ Bernard Schissel and Terry Wotherspoon, “The Business of Placing Canadian Children and Youth ‘At-risk’”, *Canadian Journal of Education*, 26, no. 3 (2001), 321-339. See also *Aboriginal Women’s Health Research Synthesis Project – Final Report* (Ottawa: Centres of Excellence for Women’s Health, 2001).

¹⁴ Jason Brown, Nancy Higgitt, Susan Winger, Christine Miller, and Larry Morrissette, “Challenges Faced by Aboriginal Youth in the Inner City”, *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 14, no. 1 (2005), 81-106. See also Brian Mellor, Leslie MacRae, Monica Pauls and Joseph P. Hornick, *Youth Gangs in Canada: A Preliminary Review of Programs and Services* (Ottawa: Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, 2005); Carol La Prairie and Phillip Stenning, “Exile on Main Street: Some Thoughts on Aboriginal Over-representation in the Criminal Justice System”. David Newhouse & Evelyn Peters (eds.), *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative, 2003), 179-193; Michael P. MacDonald, “Perceptions of Racism in Youth Corrections: The British Columbia Experience”, *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, XVII, no. 2 (1997), 329-354.

¹⁵ See Treasury Board Secretariat, *Canada’s Performance: Annual Report to Parliament* (Ottawa: Author, 2004); Michael Mendelson, *Aboriginal Peoples and Postsecondary Education in Canada* (Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2006); Andrew J. Siggner and Rosalinda Costa, *Aboriginal Conditions in Census Metropolitan Areas, 1981–2001* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2005); Canadian Council on Learning, *Students on the Move: Ways to Address the Impact of Mobility among Aboriginal Students* (Ottawa: Author, 2008).

¹⁶ St. Denis and Hampton, *Literature Review on Racism*.

their tendency to internalize feelings of low self-worth. Further, the effects of racism characterize Aboriginal people as hostile and early school leavers.¹⁷

In response to the challenge of individual and institutional racism, Indigenous youth in urban areas, deemed ‘at-risk’ for a multitude of negative outcomes, are encouraged to re-connect to culture as a solution to their marginalization in Canadian society.¹⁸ Yet, the way that culture¹⁹ is managed in schools, as something that can easily be appended to the formal curriculum, is largely ineffectual for addressing oppression and resolving educational inequalities. In the face of increasingly powerful, globalizing market forces in education, culture segregated from the ‘academic’ curriculum, added-on in non-challenging ways,²⁰ not only ignominiously ignores the fundamental epistemological foundations of what it means to be Indigenous; it also renders indistinct a historical and contemporary experience of racialization in the Canadian context. In addition to St. Denis,²¹ this argument is related to ones made by a number of other Indigenous scholars such as Mary Hermes,²² Michael Marker,²³ Julie Kaomea²⁴ and Donna Deyhle,²⁵ all of whom argue that outmoded, superficial notions of ‘culture’ are ineffective for dealing with the racialized oppression that Native students experience. Left unexamined in this approach to the problems in Indigenous education are the often-unintended effects of programming that push youth to affiliate with an Indigenous identity that is itself a product of historic and current practices of racialization. This has important policy and research implications for public schools

¹⁷ St. Denis and Hampton, *Literature Review on Racism*.

¹⁸ Verna St. Denis, “Uniting Aboriginal Education with Anti-racist Education: Building Alliances Across Cultural and Racial Politics”, *Canadian Journal of Education*, 30, no. 4 (2007), 1068-1092.

¹⁹ In its universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the 31st session of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s General Conference proclaimed that: “culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs”, *Universal declaration on cultural diversity* (Paris: Author, 2002). Despite this proclamation of culture as alive and fluid, often the features of Indigenous cultures continue to be thought of from a modernist perspective, considered constantly under threat due to processes of acculturation.

²⁰ This argument echoes that made by: Cameron McCarthy, Michael D. Giardina, Jin-Kyung Park and Susan Harewood, “Culture, Identity and Curriculum in the Age of Globalization, Postcolonialism and Multiplicity”, Cameron McCarthy, Wesley Crichlow, Greg Dimitriadis, & Nadine Dolby (eds.), *Race, Identity and Representation in Education, 2nd Ed* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 153-166.

²¹ See also Verna St. Denis, “Uniting Aboriginal Education with Anti-racist Education.” St. Denis has also written with Indigenous scholar Eber Hampton, *Literature Review on Racism* and with non-Indigenous scholar Carol Schick: “What makes anti-racist pedagogy in teacher education difficult? Three popular ideological assumptions” and Carol Schick and Verna St. Denis, “Troubling Nationalist Discourses in Anti-racist Curricular Planning.” *Canadian Journal of Education* 28, no. 3 (2005): 295-317.

²² Mary Hermes, “Complicating discontinuity.” In keeping with Hermes’ critique, I enclose the word culture in single quotation marks throughout the remainder of the paper as a way of indicating not depth of meaning; rather, it is to reflect the problematic way that culture is employed in educational and other realms, an issue taken up more fully later in the paper.

²³ Michael Marker, “After the Whalehunt: Indigenous Knowledge and Limits to Multicultural Discourse”, *Urban Education*, 42, no. 2 (2006), 1-26.

²⁴ Julie Kaomea, “A Curriculum of Aloha: Colonialism and Tourism in Hawaii’s Elementary Textbooks”, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 30, no. 3 (2000), 319-344.

²⁵ Donna Deyhle, “Navajo Youth and Anglo Racism: Cultural Integrity and Resistance”, *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 3 (1995), 403-444.

since racialization, or racial formation,²⁶ is a fundamental principle by which social relationships are organized both at the micro (identity) and macro (structural) levels.

I. Educational policy through the lens of cultural discontinuity and liberal multiculturalism

Various historians have argued that education for Native peoples in Canada from the latter part of the nineteenth century through to the late 1960s was based on the premise of assimilation. For instance, Miller²⁷ argues that a great deal of historical, social and educational policy measures such as residential schooling were aimed at assimilating or integrating Indigenous people into a dominant Canadian society. The ‘problem’ during this time was Indian culture and the ‘solution’ was to rid Indians of it. ‘Kill the Indian, save the child’, was a motto reflecting this policy focus, first linked to boarding schools in the U.S. and later to their Canadian counterparts. Other historians, such as Barman,²⁸ emphasize that rather than facilitate equitable assimilation, residential schooling and the substandard academic education it provided was meant to prepare Indian youth to occupy the lowest socio-economic echelons of Canadian society. In either case, by the middle of the twentieth century (after World War II), federal policy shifted again, and rather than a strict emphasis on segregated schooling, many Indian children began to be integrated into public schools. Subsequent high rates of failure for these children became more clearly visible in this era of Indian education.²⁹ Stemming in part from the release of the policy paper *Indian Control over Indian Education*³⁰ low levels of educational achievement began to be addressed; in part, through a shift toward focusing on culture, a direction tied to a larger movement of Indigenous cultural revitalization in North America. A significant amount of scholarship and policy has since been based on this proposition resulting in the need for a more complete understanding of this policy trajectory in Indigenous education.

A. Theory & Practice of Indigenous Education: The Turn to Culture

Using curriculum as a means to achieve their educational goals, Indian parents want to develop a program which will maintain balance and relevancy between academic/skill subjects and Indian cultural subjects.³¹

Beginning in the 1960’s, in the context of growing urban migration, the Aboriginal sovereignty movement, aided by the humanism and liberalism of that era, was successful in focusing

²⁶ Omi & Winant, *Racial Formation*, 61.

²⁷ James Rodger Miller, *Shingwauk’s vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). See also: Brian E. Titley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986) and John L. Tobias, “Protection, Civilization, Assimilation: An Outline History of Canada’s Indian Policy”, *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology*, 6, no. 2, (1976), 13-30.

²⁸ Jean Barman, “Separate and unequal: Indian and White girls in All Hallows School, 1884-1920”, Jean Barman, Yvonne Hebert and Don McCaskill (eds.), *Indian Education in Canada, The Legacy - Vol. 1* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986), 110-31.

²⁹ Harry Bertram Hawthorn, *A Survey of Contemporary Indians in Canada: A Report on Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies - Vol. 1* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer and Controller of Stationary, 1966/67).

³⁰ National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations, *Indian Control of Indian Education: Statement of the Indian Philosophy of Education* (Ottawa: Author, 1973).

³¹ National Indian Brotherhood, *Indian Control of Indian Education*, p. 9.

attention on the imperative of cultural revitalization for redressing a long history of oppression of Canada's Native peoples. Cultural revitalization was a shift away from the complex and traumatic impacts of colonization ranging from the perversion of identity³² to the dispossession of land and resources.³³ It became a way to foster respect for the Indigenous people of Canada, reinstitute pride in Native people themselves, and provide the means for achieving self-government and healthy Native economies and communities.

This shift in policy and practice, from 'trying to eradicate the Indian in Indian youth' to revitalizing cultural traditions and practices, extended to the realm of schooling. For some First Nation, Métis and Inuit individuals, education has proven to be a liberating force, leading to self-sufficiency and more equitable participation in Canadian society. However, after nearly four decades of looking at the problem of Native education through the lens of cultural discontinuity and liberal multiculturalism, too many Native students remain unsuccessful in school, often leaving without even a high school diploma. It is widely accepted that completion of high school is necessary to access a full range of educational, employment, and training opportunities. In spite of an inability to overcome the serious gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners, cultural discontinuity along with ideas concerning liberal multiculturalism remain predominant forces informing educational initiatives for Indigenous students in the twenty-first century.

B. The Cultural Discontinuity Hypothesis – Explaining Failure

[Cultural discontinuity] assumes that culturally based differences in the communication styles of the minority students' home and the Anglo culture of the school leads to conflicts, misunderstandings, and, ultimately, failure for those students. The research focuses on the process, rather than the structure of education and concludes that making the classroom more culturally appropriate will mean a higher rate of achievement.³⁴

As educational theorist Ledlow describes, cultural discontinuity, also termed cultural dissonance, with roots in sociolinguistic and anthropological studies, is based on the premise that minority children raised in a culture of their own face disjuncture when entering a school system that reflects the culture of the majority. Different language usage and socialization patterns among culturally and linguistically diverse students, when incongruent with the teacher's style of interaction, are used to explain relatively poor academic achievement. Spindler,³⁵ for instance, argues that not only does this disjuncture create interaction and communication problems that can cause minority students not to succeed, it also often produces failing as a tacit cultural goal that students actively pursue in order to preserve their own culture. In other words, when faced with having to choose one over the other, culturally and linguistically diverse students will actively resist assimilation. Even in the face of decreasing Native language use and lack of

³² Robert F. Berkhofer, "White Conceptions of Indians", Wilcomb E. Washburn (ed.), *Handbook of North American Indians - Vol. 4* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978), 522-547

³³ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999).

³⁴ Susan Ledlow "Is Cultural Discontinuity an Adequate Explanation for Dropping Out?", *Journal of American Indian Education*, 31, no. 3 (1992), 21-36.

³⁵ George D. Spindler, "Why Have Minority Groups in North America been Disadvantaged in their Schools?" George D. Spindler, (ed.), *Education and cultural process: Anthropological approaches, 2nd ed.* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1987), 160-172.

familiarity with traditional cultural practices among Indigenous learners, the cultural discontinuity hypothesis holds that by acknowledging culturally based differences related to communication and interaction styles educational inequalities can be overcome.

Because cultural discontinuity has been a predominant lens through which the experience of Indigenous students has been examined over the past few decades, there are a vast number of studies, policy papers, commission reports, and other publications that advocate for a greater focus on culture to address the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners.³⁶ One recent example examines the experience of Aboriginal students at inner city high schools in Winnipeg, Manitoba.³⁷ While the study concludes that the educational system does not adequately reflect students' cultural values and daily realities thus producing feelings of alienation among students, it identifies not only a cultural, but a class and experiential divide between Aboriginal students and families on the one hand, and the school system on the other. As is often the case in such research, participants themselves raised the challenge of racism, both within and outside of schools. Much like the Ontario study cited earlier,³⁸ a City of Calgary³⁹ study found that of the many serious and multifaceted issues facing Aboriginal youth, racism and discrimination were most widely reported by participants.

A recent study conducted by the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights in Edmonton, Alberta found that racial stereotyping and discrimination were ongoing serious human rights issues and that these were having detrimental effects on quality of life: "Focus group consultations express the sentiment that there is an invisible hierarchy of racism in both Canada and Edmonton, with Aboriginals at the bottom; in other words, Aboriginals receive the most intense and frequent racism."⁴⁰ A study I recently conducted among a group of urban Native youth in a prairie city⁴¹ produced similar findings, evidenced by these comments by two participants:

If you're a Native person, you're automatically looked down upon; I found this in any school that I went to. So their expectations are lower for you (FAY, a female youth participant).

In grade six, all the boys picked on me, being racist because I'm Aboriginal. They kept on saying we're dumb, we're useless; we're a whole bunch of things (GER, a male youth participant).

³⁶ For a discussion as this pertains to science curriculum, see Greg Aikenhead, "Integrating Western and Aboriginal Sciences: Cross-cultural Science Teaching", *Research in Science Education*, 31, no. 3 (2001). 337-355.

³⁷ Jim Silver, Kathy Mallett, Janice Greene, Freeman Simard, *Aboriginal Education in Winnipeg Inner City High Schools* (Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2002).

³⁸ UATF, *Final Report*.

³⁹ City of Calgary, *Removing Barriers: A Listening Circle 1999-2000 – A Consultation Report* (Calgary: Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative Business, Planning Research and Marketing Department, 2000).

⁴⁰ John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights, *Building a Human Rights City: Edmonton's Progress and Road Ahead - The Human Rights City Edmonton Project* (Edmonton: Author, 2007), 12.

⁴¹ Tracy L. Friedel, "Urban Indigenous Youths' Perspectives on Identity, Place and Place-based Learning and the Implications for Education", *Unpublished doctoral dissertation* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2008). Ten youth aged 14 to 16 and of Cree (*Nēhiyawak*), Iroquois-Cree, Cree-Métis, Métis, and/or Blackfoot (*Piikáni*), participated in this study, the context of which was a summer and fall place-based educational program especially designed for urban Native youth. Data collection methods include participant observation and interviews (including photo-elicitation interviews). While this sample is limited, the perspectives of participants regarding challenges in education share much in common with studies such as UATF (2007) and Canadian Heritage (2007).

Largely ignoring the racism that Native youth face, the emphasis within much of the research calls for more Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal curricular content, changes understood as important for allowing Aboriginal people to be successful in ‘two worlds’. This notion of ‘two worlds’, traceable to a hypothesis of cultural discontinuity, has been shown to be problematic in the U.S. context by Deyhle⁴² who contends that the notion ignores oppression based upon race and class. Deyhle argues that, “Although Navajo youth enter high school with high aspirations about their future opportunities, their future aspirations are thwarted by the racism they experience in school.” This sentiment is echoed in a Canadian report that states, “Racism remains an imposing barrier to the equal access of racial-minority and Aboriginal students to educational achievement.”⁴³

Current strategies in Aboriginal education, (including efforts to improve curriculum and pedagogy, certify more Aboriginal teachers, improve student supports, increase rates of parental involvement, and develop more appropriate testing), all to some extent rely on a theory of cultural discontinuity. This focus in schools, intended to redress educational inequalities and foster the building of self-esteem and cultural identity among Indigenous youth, is now three decades or so old. Given this, we should expect achievement gaps to be vastly improved and the issue of cultural identity to be of much less concern now than it was in the early 1970s. Notwithstanding such direction, in 1996, a quarter century after these ideas first became prominent, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples noted that,

The majority of Aboriginal youth do not complete high school. They leave the school system without the requisite skills for employment, and without the language and cultural knowledge of their people. Rather than nurturing the individual, the schooling experience typically erodes identity and self-worth. Those who continue in Canada’s formal education systems told us of regular encounters with racism, racism expressed not only in interpersonal exchanges but also through the denial of Aboriginal values, perspectives and cultures in the curriculum and the life of the institution.⁴⁴

According to the Commission, the gains have been limited with respect to either enhanced achievement levels or restoration of cultural knowledge, traditions and practices. Many of the issues raised by RCAP participants in the 1990’s remain paramount today.⁴⁵ Further, there is a dearth of empirical research clearly showing a connection between academic improvement and infusion of the curriculum with Aboriginal ‘culture’.⁴⁶

⁴² Donna Deyhle, “From Break Dancing to Heavy Metal: Navajo Youth, Resistance, and Identity”, *Youth & Society*, 30, no. 1 (1998), 21.

⁴³ Canadian Race Relations Foundation, *Racism in Our Schools: What To Know about It; How to Fight It* (Toronto: Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2000).

⁴⁴ RCAP, “Gathering Strength”, 434.

⁴⁵ St. Denis & Hampton, *Literature Review on Racism*. See also: Cyndy Baskin “Aboriginal Youth Talk about Structural Determinants as the Causes of their Homelessness”, *First Peoples Child & Family Review - A Journal on Innovation and Best Practices in Aboriginal Child Welfare Administration, Research, Policy & Practice*, 3, no. 3 (2007), 31-42; Yale Belanger, Liz Barron, Charlene McKay-Turnbull and Melanie Mills, *Urban Aboriginal Youth in Winnipeg: Culture and Identity Formation in Cities* (Winnipeg: Canadian Heritage, 2003); Brown et al, *Challenges Faced by Aboriginal Youth in the Inner City*; Jo-anne Dillabough Jacqueline Kennelly and Eugenia Wang, "Ginas," "Thugs," and "Gangstas": Young People's Struggles to "Become Somebody" in Working-class Urban Canada. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 21, no. 3 (2005), 83-108.

⁴⁶ As argued earlier, this is due to the fact that culture tends to be treated only trivially in the curriculum. Rare cases of research delineating local knowledge as deeply incorporated into the context of schooling, rather than

Anthropologist John Ogbu⁴⁷ offered what was an early critique of an over reliance on the cultural discontinuity hypothesis for understanding educational issues in the U.S. context, arguing that an inherent problem in looking to this theory as the key to educational improvement is its tendency to ignore macrostructural variables. Ledlow⁴⁸ and Deyhle⁴⁹ similarly contend that an exclusive focus on culture and curricular innovation draws attention away from the very real possibility that economics and social structure may be more important for explaining Native student performance. In an interpretive study examining the experience of two non-Native educators, Hermes⁵⁰ analyzes the assumptions people make about ‘culture’ and curriculum in a Native American educational context. She questions the general applicability of cultural discontinuity as an all-encompassing explanation for the failure of Native American students, calling for more attention to be paid to poverty for a more complete understanding of educational achievement. In the Canadian context, Cree-Métis scholar St. Denis⁵¹ questions the notion that an exclusive focus on ‘culture’ will lead to enhanced educational improvement, arguing that this policy direction is the continuance of a long history of ineffective policy shifts which have misconstrued the problems in Aboriginal education. All of these scholars argue that what is often assumed, in this taken-for-granted approach to educational policy and research, is that learning about culture in schools, described as that superimposed on to the curriculum,⁵² is a viable solution to the oppression that Native students face. This is important because, in the Canadian context, “First Nations, Inuit and Métis face persistent barriers that hinder their opportunities for learning, barriers that far exceed those facing non-Aboriginal people.”⁵³ These barriers include substandard housing, unemployment, and mobility issues as well as other barriers closely associated with race.⁵⁴ For the most part, these obstacles are disregarded and what continues to receive most of the attention in policy-making is a prescribed focus on ‘culture’ for Indigenous students.

We might see this single-minded focus on ‘culture’ as largely unproven in terms of closing the education gap between Aboriginal⁵⁵ and non-Aboriginal students. While many studies allude to

superimposed on to the curriculum tend to be in the Alaskan context, for example: Jerry Lipka, Nancy Sharp, Barbara Adams, Ferdinand Sharp, “Creating a Third Space for Authentic Biculturalism: Examples from Math in a Cultural Context”, *Journal of American Indian Education*, 46, no. 3 (2007), 94-115; Carol Barnhardt, “Standing their Ground: The Integration of Community and School in Quinhagak, Alaska”, *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 23, no. 1 (1999), 100-116; Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Alaska Native Ways of Knowing”, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 36, no. 1 (2005), 8-23; Dawn B. Stiles, “Four Successful Indigenous Language Programs”. John Reyhner (ed.), *Teaching Indigenous Languages* (Flagstaff, Northern Arizona University Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ John U. Ogbu. “Variability in Minority School Performance: A Problem in Search of an Explanation”, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 18, no. 3 (1987), 312-334.

⁴⁸ Ledlow, “Is Cultural Discontinuity an Adequate Explanation for Dropping Out?”

⁴⁹ Deyhle, “Navajo Youth and Anglo Racism”

⁵⁰ Hermes, “Complicating Discontinuity”

⁵¹ Verna St. Denis, “Exploring the Socio-cultural Production of Aboriginal Identities: Implications for Education”, *Unpublished doctoral dissertation* (San Francisco: Stanford University, 2002).

⁵² Hermes, “Complicating Discontinuity”, 23.

⁵³ Paul Cappon, *Measuring Success in First Nations, Inuit and Métis Learning: Policy Options* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning, 2008), 60.

⁵⁴ St. Denis and Hampton, “Literature Review on Racism.”

⁵⁵ According to the Policy Research Initiatives, “educational achievement varies significantly across Aboriginal groups. Studies led by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada reveal that the educational achievement of registered

its effectiveness as the means to improving achievement levels, the gap remains firmly entrenched, in some cases even expanding.⁵⁶ According to Statistics Canada, in 2006 two out of three, or 66% of Aboriginal persons aged 25 to 64 had completed high school; this compares to a national average of 85%. The most recent Census data also shows that while Aboriginal students living on-reserve complete high school at a lower rate than do their counterparts in urban areas, in both instances completion rates are lower than for Canada's non-Aboriginal population. In 2006, 21% of Aboriginal people in Canada had a high school diploma as their highest educational qualification. This again is lower, albeit slightly, than the national average of 24% for all Canadians. However, it is important to note that Aboriginal people are much less likely to have a university degree (8%) than are their non-Aboriginal counterparts (23%). So despite the fact that there are more Aboriginal people with a university degree than in any prior Census year, noteworthy is that the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people holding university degrees has actually widened since the previous Census.

As a catchall solution, the focus on 'culture' predominant in schools can also be considered largely unproven in terms of addressing issues of identity, something that continues to encumber Canada's Indigenous youth in the twenty-first century. Hermes argues that in the context of generations of oppression, treating culture in such trivial ways can serve to essentialize Indigenous students: "teaching beadwork or Native dance without a deeper cultural context can intersect with mainstream stereotypes of students' notions of equating a Native identity with these traditions."⁵⁷ In a classroom-based study situated in Hawaii, Kaomea shows that in the context of historically oppressed and traditionally marginalized communities, seemingly benign or progressive instructional efforts, such as the adoption of a culture-focused curriculum, can have unanticipated, counterproductive, and hegemonic effects.⁵⁸ Kaomea argues that it is necessary to examine how curriculum may perpetuate race and class based differences particularly given the assumptions about the effectiveness of such strategies. An examination of how racialization may be perpetuated through curriculum, and how this links to educational policy focused on 'culture', is thus vitally important.

Marker offers a complex analysis of cultural inclusion in public schools, making starkly clear that deep-seated Indigenous knowledge and claims to a pre-colonial identity pose epistemic challenges for liberal multicultural schooling.⁵⁹ As Marker points out, liberal multiculturalism also offers little for dealing with the racist backlashes Indigenous students face when genuine attempts are made to reinvigorate Indigenous knowledge via curriculum and pedagogy. In fact, when Native people look to re-invoke ways of knowing through historic claims to land or resources, discourses of equality are part of what underlies the overtly negative response they receive from a mainstream public. We should view cross-cultural efforts in schools, those that are non-challenging, as potentially supporting racist ideas when the emphasis remains on romanticized notions of culture (for example, Indigenous people as exotic or as hunters only in

Indians living on-reserve and the Inuit lag behind other Aboriginal groups and non-Aboriginal Canadians", *Aboriginal Youth in Canada: Emerging Issues, Research Priorities, and Policy Implications – Report of the Roundtable on Aboriginal Youth* (Ottawa: Author, 2008), 3.

⁵⁶ Statistics Canada, *Educational Portrait of Canada, 2006 Census* Catalogue No. 97-560-X (Ottawa: Minister of Technology, 2008).

⁵⁷ Hermes, "Complicating Discontinuity", 10.

⁵⁸ Kaomea, "A Curriculum of Aloha".

⁵⁹ Marker, "After the Whalehunt".



the past). Such a proposition should also lead us to ask not only whether the current, arguably exclusive focus on ‘culture’ is ineffectual, but also whether it serves to worsen the outcomes for Indigenous students. In the context of an incessant education gap and current tensions surrounding Indigenous identity, it seems necessary to question the effectiveness of educational policies that serve to negatively impact Indigenous students.

B. Liberal Multiculturalism – Constructing Difference, Erasing Race

Moving from the cultural discontinuity hypothesis to broader strategies, the focus on cultural difference in Canada’s public schools extends far beyond Indigenous peoples, emanating as it does from the perspective of liberal multicultural citizenship theory, for example, Kymlicka.⁶⁰ As in Canadian society more broadly, a focus on minority cultures in schools is meant to make schooling more reflective of the perspectives, histories and worldviews of a vast array of Canadians including Indigenous peoples. As an educational project, liberal multiculturalism has been widely accepted as contributing to social justice in nations such as Canada where society is considered to be culturally diverse. Taylor’s theory of recognition is particularly instrumental in understanding how Canada’s national identity is constructed through liberal multicultural ideas.⁶¹ Taylor conceives of group relations as cultural rather than social and Canadian society as comprised of dominant groups and minority cultures. Recognition of cultural differences but not power differences is criticized by cultural theorists such as Bannerji⁶² who argues that Taylor’s brand of liberal multiculturalism purposely seeks to erase issues of unequal power. Describing Canada as an unsettled ground of contested hegemonies, Bannerji contends that Taylor’s theory of recognition is part of a larger ideology of governing, a source used by elites to organize communities on the basis of racialized ethnicities without ever having to address Canada’s history of deeply rooted White supremacy and racism.⁶³ In other words, in the Canadian context, acknowledgement of cultural ‘Others’ has become little more than an accepted way to racialize, simultaneously ignoring the racism that continues to be directed towards various groups.

Bannerji⁶⁴ links contemporary multicultural discourse based on a moral/political message of inclusion and unity, to older appeals for liberal tolerance that also relied on the continual production of cultural difference. Indeed, a normalizing identity for Canada relies extensively on the presence of ‘Other’ cultures; Mackey⁶⁵ contends that this contemporary vision helps to preserve features of the ‘superior’ British/Canadian identity that lies at the center of Canada’s history. To highlight this notion as prevailing over time, Mackey points to the continued widespread promotion of an image of tolerant Mounties, guardians of the nation who were ‘kind’ towards Native peoples in the 19th century and hence, made the nation very unlike the genocidal regime to Canada’s south. Similar to Bannerji,⁶⁶ Mackey argues that a continuous feature of

⁶⁰ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁶¹ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁶² Himani Bannerji, “On the Dark Side of the Nation: Politics of Multiculturalism and the State of ‘Canada.’” In Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2000), 87-124.

⁶³ Backhouse, Constance, “The Historical Construction of Racial Identity and Implications for Reconciliation”, *Ethnocultural, Racial, Religious, and Linguistic Diversity and Identity Seminar*. (Halifax: Canadian Heritage, 2001).

Available on-line at www.metropolis.net.

⁶⁴ Bannerji, “On the Dark Side of the Nation”.

⁶⁵ Mackey, *The House of Difference*.

⁶⁶ Bannerji, “On the Dark Side of the Nation”.



national identity construction is that it is initiated, and worked on, by those seemingly without culture; those very often of White settler descent, “unmarked, unhyphenated, and hence normative” Canadians needful of ‘Other’ cultures (plural) in order to claim ownership of this uniquely kind and tolerant Canadian identity.⁶⁷

In the process of creating identities for the purpose of controlling populations, part of Canada’s imagining of itself as a cultural mosaic,⁶⁸ Bannerji argues that racism is ignored and tolerance is mobilized. Critical ethnographer Mackey is critical of this institutionalization of difference in Canadian society, concluding that Canadian multiculturalism is a Western project underpinned by power and dominance and functioning through “liberal, inclusionary, pluralistic, multiple and fragmented formulations and practices concerning culture and difference.”⁶⁹ Mackey contends that the desire for and construction of a national identity based upon tolerance and cultural/ethnic pluralism is a uniquely Canadian feature, part of a hegemonic project that seeks to simultaneously represent and manage culture. Understanding how difference is constructed in Canada is important because, as sociologist Razack argues in analyzing racialized and sexualized violence against Aboriginal women and minorities:

Cultural differences perform the same function as a more biological notion of race (for example, the idea that Black people have smaller brains) once did: they mark inferiority. A message of racial inferiority is now more likely to be coded in the language of culture rather than biology.⁷⁰

Cultural politics and, central to this, narratives of national identity, are highly relevant for thinking about education for today’s Indigenous youth. Indigenous culture designated as ‘Other’ is highly visible in Canadian life, arguably most evident in schools:

... especially on the Canadian prairies, a common code for racial difference is ‘cultural difference’ – a quality that racial minority children, especially Aboriginal children are said to have and which is given as the reason for any lack of school success. The phrase ‘cultural difference’ connects education failure to the ‘other’ by shifting the emphasis away from how dominant identities are implicated in the production of ‘difference’.⁷¹

The cultures of ‘Others’, on display as “fragments of folklore, food, dancing, music and customs”⁷² have become *part of* a larger Canadian culture and identity (singular) based upon Western liberalism and its “concepts of individualism, equality, rationality, universality and progress”.⁷³ This emphasis on ‘culture’ is not about making Indigenous logic systems core to the

⁶⁷ In “Troubling Nationalist Discourses”, Schick and St. Denis also highlight this point, emphasizing the ongoing racialization of Canada’s Indigenous peoples.

⁶⁸ Statistics Canada. *Canada's Ethnocultural Portrait: The Changing Mosaic* (Ottawa: Author, 2003), Catalogue No. 96F0030XIE2001008. Canada’s imagining of itself as a cultural mosaic differs greatly from U.S. national identity, the notion of a melting pot with the broad goal of cultural sameness – for a discussion of the institutionalization of difference in the U.S., see the writing of critical theorists Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley, R. Steinberg: *Changing Multiculturalism: New Times, New Curriculum* (London: Open University Press, 1997).

⁶⁹ Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999/2002), 5.

⁷⁰ Sherene Razack, *Looking White People In The Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 19.

⁷¹ Schick and St. Denis, “Troubling National Narratives”, 306.

⁷² Mackey, *House of Difference*, 89.

⁷³ Mackey, *House of Difference*, 157.

nation's enacted identity,⁷⁴ rather, as Battiste⁷⁵ and Marker⁷⁶ highlight, the tendency is for local knowledges to be thought of as superficial, unchanging, and located in the past. Not only does Canada's contemporary national identity ignore the philosophical and spiritual premise of diverse Indigenous knowledges and practices associated with these complex systems of knowing, it disavows a long history of racialized oppression and inequities in the present. Thus, rather than talk about identities in trivialized ways in educational realms, based upon superficial notions of cultural difference, what is really needed is a critical focus on processes of identity construction for a fuller understanding of what underlies the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth.

C. Indigenous identity: close ties to the focus on 'culture'

Historically, both in U.S. boarding schools and Canadian residential schools, educational policy strove to destroy Native ways of being in order to replace them with dominant, Eurocentric ones. Thus, it is necessary when discussing Indigenous identity to recognize the fact that, very often, identities have been defined not by colonized people themselves, but by colonizers. In the context of uneven power, identity, like 'culture', is construed of as homogeneous, static and essentialized while the long history of racializing Indigenous people, constructing them as inferior, is ignored. Power is an important frame of reference in the context of identity because, as Backhouse argues:

We cannot begin to debate strategies and devise policies to eradicate racism if we remain ignorant of the pervasive history of racism in Canada. Societies are not shaped by accident. The level of white privilege that exists today within the Canadian political framework, economic structure, social landscape and legal system is not the result of white merit. It is the direct result of individual and systemic race discrimination (p. 21).⁷⁷

Part of what needs to be done to eradicate the racism that is aimed at Indigenous people today is to critique discourses associated with Indigenous identity. In an historical examination in the Pacific Northwest, Raibmon examines Indigenous identity through the prism of authenticity, defined *not* as something genuine nor, "a stable yardstick against which to measure 'the real thing', rather, authenticity conceived of as a historically entrenched discourse, "a powerful and shifting set of ideas that worked in a variety of ways towards a variety of ends."⁷⁸ Tied to notions of Native people as uncivilized /White people as civilized, authenticity can be seen to underlie Canada's commonplace national narratives, particular displays of cultural tourism, representations in sports and media, etc. Such perverse representations do little to foster local,

⁷⁴ In response to a long history of racialization of Canada's Indigenous peoples, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples produced a description of Aboriginal group identity based on a multitude of factors including culture. The RCAP report describes Indigenous identity as based upon collective life, history, ancestry, culture, values, traditions and ties to the land, *People to People, Nation to Nation: Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Author, 1996), <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ap/pubs/rpt/rpt-eng.asp>

⁷⁵ Marie Battiste, *Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education: A Literature Review with Recommendations* (Ottawa: National Working Group on Education and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2002).

⁷⁶ Marker, "After the Whalehunt."

⁷⁷ Backhouse, "The Historical Construction of Racial Identity and Implications for Reconciliation."

⁷⁸ Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

longstanding, creative Indigenous knowledge systems but do much to inflict harm on Native youth as these uphold the status quo regarding a plethora of inequities in Canadian society.

The institutionalization of cultural difference evident in educational realms, for instance, in curricular alterations that emphasize authentic notions of Native peoples, encourages an identity for Native peoples that is embedded in 19th century anthropological and imperialist discourses such as romanticism. In studying colonial-era authenticity, Raibmon analyzes the ways in which government officials, missionaries, anthropologists, reformers, settlers, and tourists in the 19th century developed definitions of authenticity that applied to Aboriginal peoples, descriptions all based on a racialized binary of Indian versus White. Expressions of ‘Indianness’ considered to be authentic were those that conformed to very limited definitions and justified a sense of colonial legitimacy and alleged racial superiority. Closely tied to the myth of the vanishing Indian,⁷⁹ another nineteenth century colonial discourse, authenticity served to delimit opportunities for Indigenous peoples by advancing, for instance, the idea that Aboriginal cultures and identity were incompatible with urban residence and that urban migration was a decision by Indigenous people to leave behind ‘who they are’. While an association with authentic notions is important, Raibmon also notes the incongruence:

... although rooted in assertions of stasis, definitions of authenticity shifted over time. Elements that were initially seen as corruptions of ‘tradition’ because they developed from contact with non-Aboriginal cultures – Haida argillite carvings, Navajo wool blankets, or even horses on the Plains – have become benchmarks of Aboriginal authenticity.⁸⁰

In spite of the contradictions, ideas about authenticity, couched in colonial and racial ideology, prevailed with respect to determining qualities of what it means to be Indigenous. These notions resonate today to the detriment of a multitude of urban Indigenous youth attempting to navigate the complicated and contested terrain of identity constructions. As evidenced in this statement by a youth in the urban area, an authentic identity for Indigenous people has troubling implications:

It doesn’t seem like I’m Native in a way sometimes because I don’t really have that many Aboriginal things” (BEE, female youth participant).⁸¹

Authenticity has particularly complex implications for urban Native youth constructed as disconnected from their identity and culture by virtue of their placement in the urban area. Expected to know their culture and language while having, at the same time, to cope with pervasive racial stereotypes operating in the places where they learn and live is a difficult position in which many Native youth find themselves.

St. Denis⁸² argues that authenticity in the contemporary context imposes a cultural absolutism on the Native ‘Other’, thus encouraging particular forms of cultural restoration. Cultural markers that serve to verify who is, and who is not, an ‘authentic’ Aboriginal person today include the

⁷⁹ Robert F. Berkhofer, “White Conceptions of Indians.”

⁸⁰ Raibmon, *Authentic Indians*, 202.

⁸¹ Friedel, “Urban Indigenous Youths’ Understanding of Identity, Place and Place-Based Learning”.

⁸² Verna St. Denis, “Real Indians: Cultural Revitalization and Fundamentalism in Aboriginal Education”, Carol Schick, JoAnne Jaffe and Alisa M. Watkinson (eds.), *Contesting Fundamentalisms* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2004), 35-47.

ability to speak one's own Aboriginal language, knowing and participating in spiritual practices, possessing knowledge of stories/cultural practices of old, etc. These cultural markers produce a cultural hierarchy for Aboriginal people, one that requires that older Aboriginal people explain past actions; for example, the decision to not teach a Native language to their children during times of heightened racial discrimination. Paradoxically, under the informal rules of authenticity, such decisions made in the face of overwhelming circumstances of social inequality negatively impact how Indigenous people are viewed today.⁸³ The hierarchy that an expectation of authenticity produces is thus crucially important for understanding the experience of urban Indigenous people and in particular, the challenges faced by Native youth in schools:

“... you feel ashamed because you don't know it [culture] and you're letting them down. My social studies teacher was Native and he was like 'You guys, do you know about your culture?' I'm like, 'No.' He said, 'Exactly!'" (JAE, a female youth participant).⁸⁴

Advanced in current efforts to include 'culture' in schools is an "expectation of homogeneity, cultural preservation, unchanging traditions and historically anchored cultural values and conventions for governing social interactions."⁸⁵ Green concurs that the current focus on Aboriginal 'culture' is problematic, arguing that such notions *makes* it inimical to Western culture in the sense that while it promises hope through emancipation, it also consists of repressive features of its own, such as racism and sexism.⁸⁶

'Culture', identity and the fundamentalism that is encouraged through imperialist notions can have confusing effects on Indigenous youth while doing little to assist them to deal with the devastating effects of racism. Just as in Native-White encounters in the 19th century Pacific Northwest, where notions of authentic Indianness had a "racial tenor, marking [Indians] as separate rather than similar [to Whites], even when absent of explicit racial references like blood quantum, half breed, full blood"⁸⁷, the sort of 'cultural' education taking place in many public schools today serves to fortify a racialized identity. 'Culture' as pernicious is evident in all instances where Indigenous identity is equated with perverse stereotypes produced in the colonial era. 19th century, binary markers of authenticity; Indian/White, traditional/ modern, colonized/colonizer, rural/urban, static/dynamic, past/future, uncivilized/civilized, nature/society, cultural/political, feminine/masculine, etc., all placed Indians as the opposing image of a powerful, White male colonizer.⁸⁸ This binary system of racial and cultural identity construction underlies the imperialist nostalgia that persists, for example in notions such as 'The Ecological Indian', an increasingly common trope in public schools, one that proves to be highly deficient in terms of forwarding any sort of understanding regarding the profound sagaciousness of Indigenous peoples' place-based experience.

⁸³ St. Denis, "Real Indians".

⁸⁴ Friedel, "Indigenous youths' perspective on identity, place and place-based learning."

⁸⁵ St. Denis, "Real Indians", 26.

⁸⁶ Joyce Green, "Cultural and ethnic fundamentalism: Identity, liberation and oppression", Carol Schick, JoAnne Jaffe and Alisa M. Watkinson (eds.), *Contesting Fundamentalisms* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2004), 19-34.

⁸⁷ Raibmon, *Authentic Indians*, 6.

⁸⁸ Raibmon, "Authentic Indians."

Mohawk political theorist Taiake Alfred⁸⁹ emphasizes the need for education systems to integrate traditional Indigenous knowledge with more conventional understandings of contemporary cultures. This is important because, as Jojola points out in the U.S. context, a discourse of authenticity is responsible for dividing U.S. tribal communities along the traditional/progressive lines we see today; authenticity has become “a beleaguered postcolonial battleground for the resolution of contemporary Indian identity.”⁹⁰ We might think about authenticity in schools as constituting a policing of the borders concerning contemporary Indigenous identity, as helping to maintain the distance between White and Indian on the basis of 19th century racialized ideas (and also the distance between Indigenous groups themselves). On this basis, similar to Green,⁹¹ Lawrence asserts the need to “critically question common-sense notions about authentic Native-ness,”⁹² arguing that contemporary cultural markers for Aboriginal people are politicized categories that act to produce race and gender-based oppression within Aboriginal communities.

The focus on authenticity in schools, and related to this, simplistic, non-challenging ideas about cultural difference, contributes to essentializing Indigenous lives as it covers over racial and power inequities. Such an emphasis encourages Native youth to take up historically and racially entrenched ideas and assumptions about Indigenous identity. What is needed, in addition to a critique of ‘culture’, identity, and fundamentalism, is a much more complete examination of the concept of race and how race, together with these other concepts, continues to pose an insurmountable challenge for many of today’s Indigenous youth.

II. Bringing Race Back to the Table

St. Denis and Schick have conducted important research among primarily non-Native pre-service teachers,⁹³ work that can be considered part of a critical anti-racist discourse that, using Dei’s words, “confront the problem of race and myriad forms of racism, as well as their intersections with other forms of oppressions that reproduce and sustain white dominance, power and privilege.”⁹⁴ For Indigenous education, a racial analysis is necessary in order to bring into view the role of racialization and racism in producing difference and failure.⁹⁵ While much more

⁸⁹ Taiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹⁰ Ted Jojola, “Notes on Identity, Time, Space and Place”, Anne Waters (ed.), *American Indian thought* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 88.

⁹¹ Green, “Cultural and Ethnic Fundamentalism”.

⁹² Bonita Lawrence. “Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States: An Overview”, *Hypatia*, 18, no. 2 (2003), 24.

⁹³ St. Denis & Schick, “What Makes Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Teacher Education So Difficult?”

⁹⁴ George J. Dei, “Speaking Race: Silence, Saliency, and the Politics of Anti-racist Scholarship”, Seth P. Hier and B.Singh Bolaria (eds.), *Race and Racism in 21st Century Canada: Continuity, Complexity, and Change* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2007), 59.

⁹⁵ Schick & St. Denis, “Troubling Nationalist Discourses.” These authors highlight that any discussion of racial identities must not obscure Whiteness, produced in unison with Other racial categories. See also Michelle I. Vanhouwe who, in addition to arguing for a renewed focus on race in Aboriginal education, advocates anti-racist professional development for White in-service teachers, “White Teachers, Critical Race Theory and Aboriginal Education”, Unpublished Masters Thesis (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 2007). In “Whiteness and the Politics of Location: Postcolonial Reflections”, Raka Shome contends that Whiteness is an important concept for sociological analyses because more than being about bodies and skin colour, it is “about the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain global dominance of white imperial subjects”,

scholarly attention to this issue would be helpful, particularly research that builds on the voice of Indigenous youth themselves, existing research⁹⁶ provides more than enough rationale for a shift in educational policy towards critical anti-racist education as a means of addressing the persistent education gap in Canada. This shift entails a key role for ministries of education with respect to supporting the rights of Indigenous peoples specifically and the goals of anti-oppression more broadly.

One example of an anti-racist education policy is Ontario's Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, the "*Development and implementation of school board policies on anti-racism and ethnocultural equity*", enacted in 1993 in response to the Yonge Street Riots of 1992.⁹⁷ The policy required that all school boards in Ontario develop a race relations policy and outline its specific parameters. Policies were then vetted by a Race and Ethnocultural Equity Unit within the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training to ensure that these policies went "beyond a broad focus on multiculturalism and race relations to focus on identifying and changing institutional policies and procedures, as well as individual behaviours and practices that may be racist in their impact."⁹⁸ While a dynamic and insightful policy, meant to expose the roots of the racialized oppression that young people endure, Dei points out that the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training's *Anti-Racism, Access and Equity Division* disappeared soon after the election in 1995, resulting in "a decline in anti-racist initiatives at the government/ministerial levels in Ontario" and also at the district level.⁹⁹ The current version of Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, replacing the old policy and entitled "*Developing and implementing equity and inclusive education policies in Ontario schools*", purports to recognize the effects of racism regarding educational outcomes; however, the formal move away from anti-racist education is an important one because, as Dei describes, "we cannot simply collapse anti-racist work into the 'human/social relations' paradigm (e.g. liberal notions of 'social justice for all'). For one thing, embedded in this approach is the danger of equating oppressions in the undifferentiated notion of sameness."¹⁰⁰ Dei argues that what is needed are educational approaches that help all students to deeply examine racialized oppression and "to challenge the normalized order of things and, in particular, the constitution of dominance in Western knowledge production."¹⁰¹

The new Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119 in Ontario states, "a high-quality education for all is a key means of fostering social cohesion based on an inclusive society where diversity is affirmed within a framework of common values that promote the well-being of all citizens."¹⁰² The concerns about the shift away from an explicit focus on anti-racism and towards less direct

Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (eds.), *Whiteness: The communication of social identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 108.

⁹⁶ See City of Calgary, *Removing Barriers*; UTAF, *Final Report*; NWAC, *Aboriginal Women and Homelessness* and Brown et al, "Challenges Faced by Aboriginal Youth in the Inner City".

⁹⁷ George J. Dei, "Communicating Across the Tracks: Challenges for Anti-racist Educators in Ontario today", *Orbit*, 33, no. 3 (2003), 2-5.

⁹⁸ Ontario Ministry of Education, *Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, 1993), 7,

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curriculum/antiraci/antire.pdf>

⁹⁹ Dei, "Communicating Across the Tracks", 3.

¹⁰⁰ Dei, "Communicating Across the Tracks", 1.

¹⁰¹ Dei, "Communicating Across the Tracks", 1.

¹⁰² Ontario Ministry of Education: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/119.html>



notions of diversity, inclusion and citizenship are warranted; Marker¹⁰³ has described the stark limits of equity discourses for Indigenous students in the context of cultural revitalization. Rather than engage with racism head on, something Ontario led the way in doing in the 1990's, school boards in that province are now simply required to ensure that their policies are in keeping with the Ontario Human Rights legislation, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and so on. Moreover, school board policies are no longer vetted by a Race and Ethnocultural Equity Unit and, "Boards have flexibility to adapt their equity and inclusive education policy to take into account local needs and circumstances."¹⁰⁴ In a general assessment of the policy post-1997, Dei surmises that, "By and large the policy has been toothless except, perhaps, in individual cases where school boards have a strong commitment to anti-racism."¹⁰⁵ Without explicit policy attention to the issue of race in schools, it falls upon individual educators and school boards to try and address the reality of the hierarchies of race that exist in Canadian society. The challenge, as for all oppressions, is that racism operates not only at the level of the individual and the institution, but at the level of ideology and structure as well. Given this, the efforts of random well-intentioned teachers and school boards, admirable as their work is, will be limited in terms of creating any sort of longstanding systemic change.

A critical anti-racist education that connects with class, gender and other oppressions is a necessary response to the failure of education's promise of equality of opportunity through liberal principles such as meritocracy. Canada has recently been on the receiving end of a series of rebukes from the United Nations for a lack of progress in terms of addressing discrimination against women and Aboriginal peoples.¹⁰⁶ The interminable education gap that separates Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians calls for politicizing schooling for all students specifically in relation to race, for engaging in practices that directly confront the structural and ideological sources of oppression and group inequities. Critical anti-racist education offers the means to critique the ways in which identities are constructed in Canada, how liberal notions and racialized discourses influence the construction of identity and notions of cultural difference and how these constructions underpin the ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples and their knowledges. As an educational approach, anti-racism is not the end-all and be-all, it merely enables schools to directly confront the reality of racialized oppression. The challenges to shifting to such an emphasis are multifarious, the largest impediment being structural barriers such as the predominance of Whiteness and the disproportionate political, economic and social power this identity continues to carry in education and elsewhere.¹⁰⁷ Despite these challenges, engaging both the history and the present of race and racism through curriculum, instruction, and schooling practices more generally is requisite if we are to have any chance at fostering important systems of Indigenous knowledge through education, ways of knowing that are dynamic, complex, integrated and foundational to a transformed society.

¹⁰³ Marker, "After the Whalehunt".

¹⁰⁴ Ontario Ministry of Education: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/119.html>

¹⁰⁵ Dei, "Communicating Across the Tracks", 3.

¹⁰⁶ United Nations Human Rights Committee, *Concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee in relation to the report submitted by Canada under Article 40 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Paul Carr and Tom Klassen, "Institutional Barriers to the Implementation of Anti-racist Education: A Case Study of the Secondary System in a Large, Racially Diverse, Urban School Board", *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations*, 12, no. 1 (1997), 46-68.



Conclusion

In view of the persistent gap in education, it seems necessary to query how schooling practices and discourses may perpetuate inequities. Colonization and racialization have had a devastating impact on Indigenous peoples in terms of distortions of Indigenous identity, the imposition of alien governing systems, and the loss of land and resources. Plausibly, the impact of colonization is most forcefully felt in the educational realm, helping to explain why Indigenous education continues to be a key site for political struggle and a platform from which individuals and groups continue to seek to fulfill the goals of cultural revitalization. Notions of a ‘multicultural mosaic’, a commonplace theme heavily adopted within public education, must be read “together with the engravings of conquests, wars and exclusions”¹⁰⁸ in order to see how difference and tolerance in Canada is institutionalized, constituted, and constantly being shaped by the dominant group as part of the nation-state’s management and control of difference. Race is an important concept for educational policy given that, in connection with other factors such as class and gender, it organizes inequitable outcomes for Indigenous peoples. Notions of Indigenous identity as authentic and Indigenous cultures as superficial perpetuates racialization. A tokenized tweaking of the curriculum does little more than ensure that the dominant core curriculum is held firmly in place. Moreover, to understand urban Native youth as disconnected from their cultures on the basis of where they live, ideas with roots in the late 19th century discourse of authenticity, ignores the ongoing reality of racialized oppression. Given what Indigenous participants in various academic studies, policy papers, and commission reports say about the prevalence of racism in their lives, there is an urgent need for initiatives in public schools to move away from what has become a narrow and problematic focus on ‘culture’ as the means for improving Indigenous student schooling experiences and outcomes.¹⁰⁹

While the UTAF research makes clear that there is little happening in terms of antiracist initiatives in cities; participants in that study generally believed that antiracism education and activism were of benefit to the urban Aboriginal community.¹¹⁰ Despite the starkness of this reality, educational policy-making continues to favour a focus on ‘culture’ as the means to overcoming racialized discrimination. Attending to the lived experience of Indigenous youth, exploring how and why race matters with respect to social processes and institutional practices, and then addressing this directly through policy and practice, is key to addressing the education gap and servicing the larger project of educational decolonization, a focus of Indigenous scholars for over the past decade or more.¹¹¹ Critical anti-racist educational policy, “shifts the gaze on to

¹⁰⁸ Bannerji, “On the Dark Side of the Nation”, 93.

¹⁰⁹ While the UATF study makes clear that there is little happening in terms of antiracism initiatives in cities; participants generally believed that antiracism education and activism were of benefit to the urban community, 23.

¹¹⁰ UTAF, *Final Report*.

¹¹¹ Among those interested in the revitalization of Indigenous knowledges and decolonization as necessary for achieving long term academic sovereignty are: Bonnie Duran and Eduardo Duran, “Applied postcolonial clinical and research strategies”, Marie Battiste, (ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 86-100; James Y. Henderson, “The context of the state of nature”, Marie Battiste (ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 11-38; Marie Battiste, “Enabling the autumn seed: Toward a decolonized approach to Aboriginal knowledge, language, and education”, *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 22, no. 1 (1999), 16-27; Alfred (1999), *Peace, Power and Righteousness*; and Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.



the schools themselves (of course not in isolation from the communities), and argue [sic] that the processes of schooling, the distribution of available educational resources (human and material), teacher expectations, and the economics of schooling are cardinal to students' success."¹¹²

It is only by interrogating systems of power in Canada, such as those upheld by schooling, that we can bring to bear on education the contextualized nature of Indigenous knowledges, the socio-ecological premise and place-based epistemologies that can assist youth to reconnect to the places where they live in much more culturally responsive ways than do current discourses of diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism. Critical anti-racist education helps to expose the limits of a theory of cultural continuity and discourse of liberal multiculturalism, in the process making clear that the Aboriginal 'culture' produced in Canada's public schools is vastly unlike the Indigenous knowledges we seek to invigorate in education, systems of knowing embedded in "the primacy of direct experience, interconnectedness, relationship, holism, quality, and value."¹¹³ Needed are studies that look at the benefits of critical anti-racist education approaches to improving outcomes for Indigenous students, research that examines the potential narrowing of the education gap as a result of such initiatives. That is not to say that we should abandon the idea of culture altogether;¹¹⁴ however, achieving the spirit of cultural revitalization as envisioned in the 1960's will require freeing Indigenous identity from its colonial, racialized chains. To this, critical anti-racist education has much to offer both within and outside of schools.¹¹⁵ Critical anti-racist education can be seen as a precursor to instituting Indigenous philosophies in the educational realm, a major shift that requires us to examine how we think about schooling, its organization, curriculum, pedagogy and even its purpose. Should we find our way there, this shift offers significant potential for improving education for all students attending Canada's public schools.

¹¹² Dei, "Communicating Across the Tracks", 5.

¹¹³ Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), 66.

¹¹⁴ The comments of one reviewer were helpful in making clear that Indigenous cultural revitalization itself may not be problematic, it is the troubling means and ends that this strategy pursues which poses problems for Indigenous Canadians in the twenty-first century.

¹¹⁵ Robert Regnier, "Warrior as Pedagogue, Pedagogue as Warrior: Preliminary Reflections on Aboriginal Anti-racist Pedagogy", Roxanne Ng (ed.), *Anti-racist, Feminism, and Critical Approaches to Education* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group Inc., 1995)

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