

# Theories and Disciplines as Sites of Struggle: The Reproduction of Colonial Dominance Through the Controlling of Knowledge in the Academy

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*This article describes aspects of Indigenous knowledge and research that contrast with university-based approaches to knowledge. Indigenous scholars have asserted the sacred local nature of traditional understandings that place Elders and stories as the centerpiece of learning. Rather than asking Aboriginal students to adapt to university culture, universities should understand First Nations values about local ecological knowledge and sustainable living as a mode by which to revitalize their own institutional environments. Examining the cultural bias in commonplace academic terms such as theory, scientific, and research, this article shows the epistemological tensions First Nations graduate students feel as they make their way through the terrain of the academy. At the same time, the presence of First Nations faculty and students is transforming the university environment while questioning the goals and processes of learning.*

In many ways there has been a general and significant advancement in the level of cultural responsiveness to Indigenous perspective in postsecondary institutions throughout North America, but notable differences exist between regions and between institutions. Each university's relationship to Indigenous people is saturated with—using seriously Geertz's (1983) meaning—*local knowledge*. The cross-cultural context of each university is created from a history of the norms, values, and interests of alumni, administrators, faculty, and students, and increasingly from the outside economic and political pressures of corporations and media. And although on the one hand there has been an opening of opportunities and alternative approaches to university-based knowledge in the last decade, successful programs for Indigenous students have been largely overwhelmed by evolving postindustrial and technocratic trends that emphasize preparing students for careers in a globalized marketplace. The efforts to make education serve the status quo have often made the place-based knowledge and identity of Indigenous people seem like an antiquated and sometimes contentious perspective. The Indigenous voice is contentious in that, as Bowers, Vasquez, and Roaf (2000) observe, "science is being used as the basis of a new ideology that justifies the 'extinction' of cultures that do not 'adapt' to the expanding network of computer-mediated intelligence required by the global economy" (p. 192). Indigenous place-based knowledge requires understanding the moral

proportions of oral traditions and long-sustained relationships with the land. It implies and prescribes particular forms of restraint and responsibility from communities and individuals that have a sense of belonging to the land. Industrial and postindustrial society has been oriented toward replacing traditional cultures that hold to this sacred sense of place with an individualized identity that is malleable and transportable throughout a global marketplace. In Canada and the United States, residential schooling was deployed to replace the Aboriginal child's actual identity, language, and connection to the land with a shadow personality that would serve the interests of mainstream economic and cultural goals toward colonial dominance. The results of this dark experiment continue to plague both Aboriginal and dominant societies. If educators and politicians were to consider seriously the discourse of Aboriginal Elders, they might slow their thoughts and actions to a more cautious and measured state of consideration. Such a change would frustrate neoliberal sensibilities about hurriedly preparing students for competition in a globalized marketplace. Many Indigenous communities, in evaluating the assortment of difficult choices and dilemmas about education and economic development, now take the view that "over the long term the loss of local knowledge and patterns of moral reciprocity essential to traditional communities will become more significant to the world's ecological well-being" (Bowers et al., 2000, p. 193).

In this article I examine some aspects of Indigenous participation in higher education, critically focusing in part on how academic disciplines and approaches to scholarship are culturally biased and hegemonic in confrontation with Indigenous place-based knowledge. Aboriginal people in universities experience a culture clash that often occurs at the deepest levels of assumptions about reality and epistemology (Barnhardt, 2002).

### *The Academy from an Indigenous Viewpoint*

Barnhardt (2002) noted,

Native students trying to survive in the university environment (an institution that is a virtual embodiment of modern consciousness) must acquire and accept a new form of consciousness, an orientation which not only displaces, but often devalues the world views they bring with them. (p. 240)

One of the central problems for Indigenous intellectuals is that words—in English—are presently owned by an academic culture that has some consensus on the legitimate definition of these terms and activities. Indigenous scholars must either invent new words and then struggle upstream against the prevailing current to wedge them into the academic lexicon, or expand the meaning of conventional terms to include Indigenous perspective. This means essentially seizing a word and saying, "this is what *we* mean when we say *science*, or *epistemology*, or *respectful methodology*." Some Indigenous scholars like Deloria (1991), Kawagley (2001), and Cajete (1994) have taken this approach of seizing powerful

words like *science* and are using them to describe Indigenous knowledge. Before the arrival of these Indigenous intellectuals, the shibboleth of “progress” consigned tribal understandings to a primitive past long since superseded by modern science. Indigenous thinkers have pointed to the limits of conventional terminology and explained how their own Aboriginal languages referenced time, place, and sacred reality in ways that expand the possibilities for understanding nature, consciousness, and moral conduct. Indigenous knowledge methods are the ultimate in interdisciplinary learning. Ortiz (1969) combined conventional scholarship with traditional knowledge and produced works of enduring importance. However, the nature of disciplinary compartmentalization at the time relegated his now classic book on Tewa understandings of space, time, and being to specialization discourses in anthropological theory rather than bringing it into conversations about cross-cultural education and the reinvigoration of university curriculum.

For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students the university is a journey through a particular kind of knowledge. In the course of their academic progress and preparation to conduct research, they encounter themes that challenge their values and world views; they develop cognitive and communication skills that ask them to critique the home and community culture from which they come. These encounters in classrooms usually pressure the Indigenous student to speak for and account for his or her culture and community values while the mainstream *culturally specific* assumptions about the goals and purposes of institutional education are often left unexamined as a *culture*: simply taken for granted as *the normal*. The First Nations student is too often placed in the role of the exoticized Other. Academic life is at its best and worst a transformative experience. Aboriginal students experience education as a good journey when they feel themselves gaining a deeper understanding of their own experience in the framework of a genuinely respectful comparative cross-cultural encounter that carefully considers advanced tribal knowledge alongside traditional academic knowledge. Too often though, the academic language used to describe reality has a built-in ethno-bias toward individualism and against traditional forms of knowledge.

*“You can’t live in the past” and Other Academic Ethnocentrism*

The historic and ethnohistoric past is too often dismissed as irrelevant for understanding the substantive nature of the contemporary world. A prevailing notion both in the academy and in the larger society is that the past is dead, that grandma and grandpa’s life was hard, full of drudgery and boredom, and that ancestors’ ways of living were inferior to present forms of social structuring; that things are getting better and that they will continue to improve. The *Zeitgeist* is focused on the present and the future, not on the past. For Indigenous people though, as Okanagan author Armstrong (cited in Thorpe, 2001), has said, it is difficult to see in

the contemporary world how to make sense of things “without stepping back into history and living in the old way” (p. 250). Meanwhile, Aboriginal students face a continual barrage of messages from professors, politicians, and the media, all saying versions of the same thing: “You can’t live in the past!” For Aboriginal people the past is tied into their relationship with land and their sense of the sacred. It is an affront to say “You can’t live in the past.” Navajo scholar Martin (2001) explains some fundamental differences: “I am not arguing that non-Natives are not connected with their environment— there is just a difference in how words like ‘connection’ or ‘ties’ are used. Relationships defined are ancient and tied to community knowledge and religion” (p. 36). Thus although non-Native students might experience the challenge to their world view as an iconoclastic pressure and a sometimes painful widening of their horizons, Native students experience such education as assimilation and nullification of their own identity. Under these conditions of culture clash, the “transformation” of attending university is not an expanding of intellectual possibilities, but a space of alienation that lures Aboriginal students away from community and sense of place to a kind of nowhere metropolis where they wander as strangers through a maze of careers and “choices.”

#### *Research and the Self*

*Research* is a slippery term in this cross-cultural context. The conventional academic use of the word refers to a systematic approach to gaining knowledge; the *researcher* relentlessly searches for facts or data. Unrelated data or irrelevant data are disregarded, and the emphasis is usually on a narrow kind of questioning, compartmentalizing, and specializing knowledge. Although Indigenous modes of gaining knowledge can also be systematic, they usually involve connecting diverse points of reference that defy disciplinary or methodological boundaries and draw on an individual’s relationships to people, animals, the landscape, and an oral tradition framing a time-space arrangement. Dreams and meditative states can factor into knowledge acquisition. This is not to say that Indigenous research is not empirical, only that it is not narrowly empirical toward ends that are isolated from the concerns of community: a community made real by the stories from ancestors who established a sustainable presence on the land. Commonplace approaches to research usually push the inquirer to go relentlessly to get the information and bring it back to the academy where it is processed and made acceptable. This approach resembles an industrial model of resource extraction. An Indigenous approach is opposite to this, with the knowledge-seeker spending time in preparation and rituals that produce a state of humility, sensitivity, and openness. The knowledge in this method seeks the student rather than the other way round. Smith (1999) has outlined some of these themes of Indigenous ways of knowing:

The arguments of different indigenous peoples based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape and to stones, rocks insects and other things, seen and unseen, have been difficult arguments for Western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept. These arguments give a partial indication of the different world view and alternative ways of coming to know, and of being, which still endure within the indigenous world. (p. 74)

This emphasis on relationships puts animals, plants, and landscapes in the active role of *teacher* and therefore results in a more holistic and integrated understanding of phenomena. This kind of holism resists constrictive and contrived taxonomies as well as disciplinary boundaries. It also produces a state of consciousness in the Aboriginal intellectual that makes no separation between scientific and moral understandings. Although feminists, poststructuralists, and critical theorists have illuminated biases in epistemology and moral values, these discussions often omit consideration of the deeper levels of moral conduct that are implicated in performing research. Qualitative researchers might consider themes of collaboration, community, and power differentials in relationships with informants, but an Indigenous methodology must go beyond this and connect the inquirer to an ancient sense of the journey for knowledge. From an Indigenous perspective the knowledge-seeker must go through a period of training that foregrounds his or her own self-reflection as part of many traditional protocols. Once the proper preparations and ceremonies have been observed, the individual can receive knowledge without harming himself or herself or the community. Knowledge is powerful and potentially dangerous if one is not ready to receive it properly; a deep and sublime sense of relationships is required. Basso (1996) has written about how for the Cibecue Apache the pursuit of knowledge is inextricable from the moral relationship to the land: "Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of self, to grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person" (p. 34). It is difficult to imagine an Indigenous student successfully bringing this kind of a conversation into a graduate seminar on research. This is not to say that these conversations never happen; in fact they are happening more and more often. It is simply to say that they are still uncommon. Although a group of qualitative methodologists have engaged in a more self-reflective and autoethnographic style, this is without broad acceptance and remains a somewhat marginal approach in the university. For Indigenous scholars implicit, or sometimes explicit, in their traditional modes of knowledge reception are particular kinds of methodology requirements. The oral traditions, ceremonies, and rituals all reinforced not only ways of knowing, but ways of being without separating knowing from being. There have always been prescribed ways of conducting oneself in relation to animals, spirits, or human teachers and Elders. A primary and essential kind of methodological cognizance regards how to conduct oneself in the presence of Elders.

*Methodology: "Clean the Shed First"*

Aboriginal students often experience a great deal of tension when trying to construct a methodology that respects traditional knowledge protocols, but still responds to the institutional expectations about how research must be conducted. For example, Elders who have traditional knowledge are often unwilling to sign a document that gives consent to the researcher and the university. Such formality can be viewed as an insult and as a sign that the Native student has been assimilated by the colonizing university. Elders usually prefer a more traditional gesture that respects both the sense of sacredness and the sense of intimacy between the speaker and the listener. University protocols, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the need to remain detached and objective when conducting research. The researcher is often expected to extract information from people under conditions that maximize distance and anonymity. Elders are often generous with their knowledge, but they may wish to see some reciprocal spirit of consideration from the researcher. My grandfather was of this type. Wanting to learn how to make something or understand something, I would ask him to show me. He would say something like,

I'm busy right now grandson, but if you want to learn that, it won't be easy. You find me tomorrow morning and I'll take you out and show you how to do that. For right now though, why don't you clean out my shed? It's a bad mess and I can't find some tools that I need in there. Yep, you go clean the shed, and then I'll show you what you want to know.

I was not always happy about this exchange; cleaning the shed was a big, unpleasant job and could take all day. But it was a test of my sincerity about wanting to learn something. In the end a context was created where I learned not only what I wanted to know, but also learned how to clean a shed. The research methodology provided my grandfather with both a clean shed and an attentive student.

*Theory and Story*

It is exceedingly difficult to make Indigenous knowledge, which is place- and experience-based, relevant in an academy that exalts the most abstract and placeless theories about reality. Aboriginal ways of knowing elude more universal theorizing because they are usually conveyed through oral tradition, which frames reality around the storied features of the landscape. The university, on the other hand, is oriented toward the transportability of both knowledge and credentials; it gazes toward a vast ocean horizon, but misses its own reflection. Academics often know a great deal more about the work of their international colleagues than they know about the history and ecology of the land that the university is sitting on. Intellectual work often proceeds removed from the natural ecology and without regard for human or environmental consequences. Contrast this disconnected theorizing with Cajete's (1994) description of Indigenous knowledge: "Traditional education is a vehicle for the ecological sense and the spiritual ecology of the people" (p. 165). An Indigenous

sense of theory is concerned with the interconnected relationships in a specific place. A focus on the smallest aspect of a place that invokes the spiritual relationship that binds reality together creates a more genuine sense of the universal and global, whereas attempts to form abstract theories fail in that they must always be conditional and confined to a disciplinary discourse. In a sense theory might be the most difficult word to “seize” in the academy. Indigenous people have always explained the most intricate aspects of relationships through their oral traditions. Many aspects of oral traditions emphasize transformation. For example, among Coastal Salish people, “Xa:ls the Changer” and “Coyote the Trickster” are important in stories that map the moral and epistemological features of the landscape. The stories offer insights into cause-and-effect relationships that not only explain reality, but give particular kinds of moral insights about relationships embedded in the land. This is what Deloria (1991) has referred to as a “sacred geography.” An Indigenous theory will inevitably collide with the academy’s insistence on separating the sacred from the secular because the story has a power to affect not only the consciousness of the individual, but also the spirit of the person. The transformation going on in the story often reproduces itself in the transformation of the individual who hears the story.

#### *Indigenous Knowledge and Transformation of the Academy*

Aboriginal perspective—and critique—on mainstream educational content and goals is not only for Aboriginal students. It is both a tonic—and a polemic—that needs to be engaged with throughout the university. Deloria (1991) maintained that by

viewing the way the old people educated themselves and their young gives a person a sense that education is more than the process of imparting and receiving information, that it is the very purpose of human society and that human societies cannot really flower until they understand the parameters of possibilities that the human personality contains. (p. 21)

The question remains though: what kinds of personalities will not only be tolerated, but celebrated in the academy? Indigenous values are oriented toward promoting human conduct and traits that are often in conflict with what has become commonplace in universities. Humility, for example, is an important Aboriginal value:

When a *siya’:*m (Elder or person of noteworthy stature) walks into a gathering, he automatically sits in the back; if the others invite him to sit in the front, then he moves. That is humility. I watch Canadian politicians and I wonder if they have ever heard of that principle. (Point, in Carlson & McHalsie, 2001).

This is not to say that professors are like politicians or that some respected professors do not exhibit humility; it is only to suggest that in the confines of a university culture and a dominant society increasingly saturated with careerism and ego, humility is less than highly valued—in comparison with other cultural traits such as ambition and self-promotion.

Rather than being simply disruptive to Western knowledge customs, Indigenous knowledge, predicated on relationships and a spiritual connection to the land, may provide a means to connect the disparate elements of separate disciplines into a whole. Battiste (2000) has expressed this need to avoid the marginalization of First Nations knowledge:

The real justification for including Aboriginal knowledge in the modern curriculum is not so that Aboriginal students can compete with non-Aboriginal students in an imagined world. It is, rather, that immigrant society is sorely in need of what Aboriginal knowledge has to offer. We are witnessing throughout the world the weaknesses in knowledge based on science and technology. It is costing us our air, our water, our earth; our very lives are at stake. (p. 201)

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991), in their groundbreaking work on Indigenous participation in higher education, told of a monkey that is so obsessive with its habitual way of getting food that it is caught and sold to a zoo. In this metaphor we are warned that the comfortable patterns of university life and knowledge production not only alienate Indigenous people, they impede healthy institutional change. Interrupting the lemming-like journey of Western technocratic knowledge could become the most powerful and enduring legacy yet of First Nations education. Place-based education as described by Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b) is probably the closest fit to Indigenous educational theory, but it falls short in general because such perspectives often fail to factor in spiritual connections to the land: connections that are the centerpiece of Indigenous approaches to identity and learning. Learning about Indigenous ways of relating to land will require decolonization and a deprogramming about ways of thinking about time, space, and the true uses of knowledge toward purposes that are not yet at the core of university life.

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