Indigenous Epistemological Pluralism: Connecting Different Traditions of Knowledge Production

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What relationship between language, knowledge, and reality would enable us to engage with differently positioned traditions of knowledge production in the movement towards Indigenizing the international academy? This article offers a situated response to this question, drawing on specific traditions that emphasize existential questions in Indigenous studies literature. I argue that epistemological pluralism can be understood as an effect of specific Indigenous metaphysical assumptions that connect reality, being (ontology), knowing (epistemology), and language very differently from Enlightenment-inspired ontologies and epistemologies. The conclusion explores some of the implications of this insight in terms of the crafting of narratives in research and health-related practices.

Introduction

Epistemological pluralism is an under-explored inherent feature of some Indigenous cosmologies that can be used productively to enhance research processes and transnational spaces of dialogue in order to support international efforts to Indigenize the academic space as a form of creative contention (of continuous forms of neo-colonialism), resistance (to imperialism), and (Indigenous) resurgence (Alfred, 2005). Alfred (2005) defines this movement as a spiritual revolution: "a culturally rooted social movement that transforms the whole of society and a political action that seeks to remake the entire landscape of power and relationship to reflect truly a liberated post-imperial vision" (p. 27). My understanding of this revolution, based on Cree traditions, is that it needs to take account of the medicine embedded (or hidden) in different ways of knowing and being of different directions in the medicine wheel. This understanding compels me to think about balance as a form of epistemological pluralism that honours different forms of wisdom while recognizing the partiality and limitations of each offering, including their productive and destructive potential. This requires a different understanding and relationship between language, knowledge, being, and knowing.

The logocentric and totalizing nature of dominant forms of knowing that can be traced to the Enlightenment lead to a form of hegemonic ethnocentrism that is blind and deaf from the wisdom created and constantly renewed in other traditions of *experiencing* the world, which might not place

the same weight to *knowing* the world in absolute, objective, or subjective ways. Enlightenment ideas of subjectivity that individuate and place human beings at the centre of a world that can be apprehended or known by the senses and described in language also limit our capacity to imagine beyond hierarchical binaries, such as mind and body, culture and nature, true and false, real and unreal, action and inaction, and modern and traditional. I argue that different conceptualizations of the relationship between language, knowledge, being, and reality in Indigenous worldviews enables the possibility of multiple and equivocal interpretations of phenomena that do not place human knowing or being at the centre of the world (Garroutte, 1999; Alexander, 2005; Andreotti, Ahenakew, & Cooper 2011a; 2011b).

Cajete's (2000) distinction, between metaphoric and rational minds, point to this possibility. He argues that the combination of rational (social-political) and metaphoric (existential) insights provide a more robust and rigorous strategy for coping with the complexity, uncertainty, and plurality of both social phenomena and our encounters with difference. A *spiritual revolution*, in this sense, means redefining our relations to social scripts of reality in ways that highlight their political and historical significance, but that also recognize their tendency to restrict possibilities for thinking and existence. From this perspective, a spiritual revolution is not a question of choosing one script over another (i.e., *either/or*), but of enlarging discursive, ethical, and existential possibilities for thinking and relating to the world: by working in solidarity with others to transform systems that have historically reproduced inequalities.

In previous collaborative work, my colleagues and I have identified and discussed some of the challenges of epistemological pluralism in higher education (Andreotti, Ahenakew, & Cooper, 2011a). We have also proposed that epistemological pluralism is an intrinsic component of Indigenous conceptualizations of reality (Andreotti, Ahenakew, & Cooper 2011b). In this article, I expand this analysis, focusing more specifically on research conducted by Indigenous or non-Indigenous researchers in ethical solidarity with Indigenous communities. In the first part of this article, drawing on the work of de Sousa Santos (2007), I engage with metaphors and ideas related to the construction and sustenance of hegemonic ethnocentrism that disqualifies and creates obstacles to epistemological pluralism. In the second part, drawing on Indigenous studies literature, I explore traditional metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, and linguistic assumptions that can ground an Indigenous epistemological pluralism that honours the gifts and medicine of all four directions. In the concluding section of the article, I offer examples of how these insights have been applied in research and health-related practice.

Epistemologies of Blindness: Hegemonic Epistemological Ethnocentrism

Adding to the work of Indigenous and postcolonial scholars who have examined the ontological and epistemological effects of colonialism, de Sousa Santos (2007) offers a useful metaphor for the understanding of epistemological dominance and possibilities of solidarity and epistemological pluralism. de Sousa Santos (2004) approaches the issue of epistemic dominance with a focus on the epistemic blindness (to other epistemologies) created as a result of colonial domination. This blindness is an effect of the hegemonic ethnocentrism of colonialism (Andreotti, 2011). de Sousa Santos (2007) refers to the key legacy of epistemological dominance as *abyssal thinking*. He defines abyssal thinking as a system consisting of visible and invisible distinctions established through a Cartesian modern logic that defines social reality as either on *this side of the abyssal line* or on *the other side of the abyssal line*. de Sousa Santos (2007) explains:

The division is such that "the other side of the line" vanishes as reality becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as non-existent. Nonexistent means not existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being. Whatever is produced as nonexistent is radically excluded because it lies beyond the realm of what the accepted conception of inclusion considers to be its other. What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of the co-presence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only nonexistence, invisibility, non-dialectical absence. (p. 2)

He associates *this side of the line* (i.e., metropolitan societies) with the paradigm of regulation/emancipation and the *other side* (i.e., shifting colonial territories) with appropriation and violence (committed by *this side of the line*). He states that the modern abyssal line is not fixed, but that its position at any one time is heavily controlled and policed. He also acknowledges that the displacements of the line have affected the distinction between the metropolitan and the colonial in recent times, in many spaces "turning the colonial into an internal dimension of the metropolitan" (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p.9).

Modern abyssal thinking thrives in the making and radicalization of distinctions (i.e., hierarchical binaries) that make the abyssal line in which they are grounded invisible. One example is the distinction between scientific truth and falsehood, which is projected as universal. This universality, according to de Sousa Santos (2007), is premised on the invisibility of ways of knowing that do not fit parameters of acceptability established by modern knowledge, law, and science in their abyssal mode of operation. The result is that, as seen from *this side of the line,* on *the other side of the line* "there is no real knowledge; there are beliefs, opinions, intuitive or subjective understandings, which, at the most, may become objects

or raw materials for scientific enquiry" (p. 2). As a result, vast arrays of cognitive experiences are wasted. de Sousa Santos (2007) refers to this trashing of epistemologies as epistemicide.

In legal terms, it is *this side of the line* that determines what is legal and illegal based on state or international law, eliminating the possibilities and experiences of social realms where such distinctions (i.e., state, international, legal, illegal) would be unimaginable as forms of organization:

This radical denial of co-presence grounds the affirmation of the radical difference that, on *this side of the line* separates true and false, legal and illegal. The *other side of the line* comprises a vast set of discarded experiences, made invisible both as agencies and as agents, and with no fixed territorial location (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 3).

This denial of co-presence translates into a hegemonic contact that "converts simultaneity with non-contemporaneity [making up] pasts to make room for a single homogeneous future" (de Sousa Santos, p. 3). The project of a homogeneous future justifies the violence and appropriation carried out in its name. Thus, one part of humanity (considered subhuman), on the other side of the abyssal line, is sacrificed in order to affirm the universality of the part of humanity on this side of the line.

de Sousa Santos (2004) offers insights that can be used to overcome a few common conceptual straightjackets in contemporary debates. He argues that the struggle for global social justice is inseparable from the struggle for global cognitive justice. This implies that political resistance must be "premised upon epistemological resistance" (de Sousa Santos, 2004, p. 10), which calls not for more alternatives but for an "alternative thinking about alternatives" (de Sousa Santos, 2004, p. 10). Such alternative way of thinking about alternatives (i.e., not just having different thoughts within the same cognitive framework, but thinking differently about alternatives, at the edges or beyond one's inherited cognitive framework), needs a sociology of emergences (de Sousa Santos, 2004) which involves "the symbolic amplification of signs, clues, and latent tendencies that, however inchoate and fragmented point to new constellations of meaning as regards both to the understanding and the transformation of the world" (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p.10).

de Sousa Santos (2007) advocates for an *ecology of knowledges* based on a recognition of the "plurality of heterogeneous knowledges (one of them being modern science) and on the sustained and dynamic interconnections between them without compromising their autonomy" (p. 11). In de Sousa Santos' (2007) ecology of knowledges, knowledges and ignorances intersect "as there is no unity of knowledge, there is no unity of ignorance either" (p. 12). Given the interdependence of knowledges and ignorances,

the ideal would be to create *inter-knowledges* where learning other knowledges does not mean forgetting one's own. Hence, the ecology of knowledges he proposes aims to enable epistemological consistency for "pluralistic, propositional thinking" (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 12), where the value of knowledges are attributed according to the notion of *knowledge-as-intervention-in-reality* and not *knowledge as-a-representation-of-reality* (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p.13).

He proposes that "the credibility of cognitive construction [be] measured by the type of intervention in the world that it affords or prevents" (de Sousa Santos, 2007). He suggests that the ecology of knowledges not only requires a break from hegemonic ethnocentrism, but a "radical critique of the politics of the possible without yielding to an impossible politics"(ibid).This drive towards egalitarian simultaneity is based on an idea of incompleteness: "since no single type of knowledge can account for all possible interventions in the world, all of them are incomplete in different ways [hence] each knowledge is both insufficient and inter-dependent on other knowledges" (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p.17). Each knowledge is established "through constant questioning and incomplete answers" (de Sousa Santos,2007, p. 18) as the basis of prudence, enabling "a much broader vision of what we do not know, as well as of what we do know, and also [the awareness] that what we do not know is our own ignorance, not a general ignorance" (de Sousa Santos, 2007).

Drawing critically on de Sousa Santos' helpful insights, I propose that the *ecology of knowledges* epistemological stance may be inherent in some Indigenous worldviews, as illustrated by Cajete (2000) with reference to the Native American medicine wheel as a multi-perspectival and multi-modal tool of engagement with the world (see also Ahenakew, Andreotti, & Cooper, 2011b). However, I also argue that, due to de Sousa Santos' focus on knowledge-as-cognition (that depends on discursive articulations), he may have not sufficiently theorized three crucial dimensions that jeopardize the possibility of egalitarian simultaneity.

The first dimension relates to the difficulties and complexities of translation between unevenly valued knowledge systems (cf. Viveiros de Castro, 1992; Bhabha, 1994; de Sousa, 2012). The second refers to the difficulties and complexities of living in multi-dimensional worlds affected by colonial practices (cf. Viveiros de Castro, 1992, Abram, 1997, Ermine, 1995, Alexander, 2005, Andreotti et al., 2011b). The third dimension refers to the fact that cognition itself may be a limited concept to define egalitarian relationships as it relies on a modern conceptualization of the necessity of knowledge to mediate relationality, rather than, for example, elusive spiritual insights, (see Alexander, 2005; Ahenakew, Andreotti, Cooper, &

Hireme, 2014). This last dimension is explored in more depth in Indigenous studies literature that privileges existential or spiritual approaches over political questions (Garroutte, 1999; Buendía, 2003; Alexander, 2005; Royal, 2009; Jackson, 2010 Mika, 2012).

In order to explore de Sousa Santos' idea of an *ecology of knowledges*, I will first delineate the outline of what I understand are the traditional metaphysics of Indigenous *knowledge* in order to turn my focus to Indigenous *knowing* in the next section.

Epistemologies of Seeing: Indigenous Epistemological Pluralism

With Indigenous colleagues, I have argued before that it is extremely difficult to represent an *other* way of seeing, using the tools, languages, literacies, and technologies of what has become the mainstream (e.g., alphabetic writing, English, academic genre) (Andreotti, Ahenakew, & Cooper, 2011a). I have used Cajete's (2000) distinction between two interrelated minds to talk about this limitation: a rational mind that operates with certain and practical knowledge (e.g., numbers, facts, and material survival) and a metaphoric mind that operates with stories, song, poetry, collective energies, and ancestral symbols (e.g., visions, rhythms, and existential questions). Therefore, in order to create an interface between the two systems that engages both minds, I will stretch the academic genre and make use of artistic, metaphoric, and poetic expression to *enact* my argument in this section. I theorize the foundations of this strategy further in the next section of this chapter.

Indigenous peoples have traditionally organized their lives around the cyclical movement of cosmic bodies, such as the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars. These celestial bodies are perceived as entities that are "spirituality and morally interconnected with all things of the earth" (Williamson, 1998). Their cosmic rhythm and energy descended downward to each tribe's ancestral territory, to their centre, to offer knowledge of place and relationship, as well as when to schedule and how to perform ceremony, prayer, ritual, migration, seeding, harvesting, and hunting, which are the basis of Indigenous epistemology (Cajete, 2000; Ahenakew, 2012). In Cree ontologies, for example, this epistemology is metaphorically experienced through the medicine wheel which situates the rational (cognitive) and metaphoric (existential) experiences side by side in the processes of knowing and becoming.

Little Bear (2000) states that, through observation, Indigenous science participates in realities of continuous processes of regular patterns where sustainability is dependent on a renewal of relationships. Through the repeated cosmic pattern of creation and circular renewal of relation, death,

and rebirth, Indigenous ways of knowing unfold. Cajete (2004) suggests that through Indigenous epistemology, "A person's understanding of the cycles of nature, behaviour of animals, growth of plants, and interdependence of all things in nature determined their culture, that is, the ethics, morals, religious expression, politics, and economics. The people came to know and to express a "natural democracy," in which humans are related and interdependent with plants, animals, stones, water, clouds, and everything else" (p. 46). Through solidarity with the rational mind and amplification of the metaphoric mind, epistemological dominance can be disrupted and held in tension within an epistemological pluralistic way of relating with the world.

For Cree scholar Ermine (1995), the Indigenous understanding of the natural laws of spiritual relations involves the fusion of inner and outer worlds and, I argue, the integration of the rational and metaphoric minds (Cajete, 2000). For the Nehiyaw (Cree peoples) *mamahtawisiwin* (spiritual gifts) allow one to connect with *Manito* (Creator) "to come to know [i.e., to create stories about] the natural laws, circular movements, and relationships, and in so doing, co-create Indigenous knowledge and collective consciousness" (pp. 103-104). An Indigenous person's inner space is fused with the universe's outer space through immanence (spiritual forces) of an unfolding organic consciousness of cosmic existence. This inner space is intertwined within a web of universal relationships that unfold and enfold within a living organic flow of energies through the spiritual consciousness of the great mystery (Bastien, 2004). This is grounded on the metaphysical assumption "that the spirit of the universe resided in the earth and things of the earth, including human beings" (p. 46) and it is this spirit that gives birth to simultaneity, contemporaneity, and cyclical understandings of time and multi-layered realms of reality. In other words, in contrast with the idea that we are our bodies (who may or may not relate to a spirit who is outside of us), this metaphysical assumption implies that we are spirit who inhabits bodies (i.e., I am not a body, I have a body) that are differentiated expressions (in *form*) or an undifferentiated whole (*formlessness*) that is beyond cognition. In this sense, I do not relate to other people or to a mountain, for example, primarily through *knowledge* of their differentiated individuation, but through the experience of being part of the undifferentiated whole. That is why the mountain is my relation: it is animated by the same mystery-force that animates my own temporary existence in this body, as Ermine (1995) explains:

In their quest to find meaning in the outer space, Aboriginal people turned to inner space. The inner space is that universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being ... Aboriginal people found a wholeness that permeated inwardness and that also extended into the outer space ... their fundamental insight was that

all existence was connected and that the whole enmeshed the being in its inclusiveness ... It is a mysterious force that connects the totality of existence—forms, energies, or concepts that constitutes the outer and inner worlds (p. 104).

If knowing in differentiated bodies is an ongoing story-making in deep connection with a formless force that cannot be known in its totality, known knowledge is always provisional and not-known knowledge is considered a *mystery*. This mystery is what demands respect and humility from human beings, especially in their practices of story-making and storytelling of an ever-changing reality that remains undefined. Equality of existence, in this sense, is predicated on a profound awareness of interdependence; respect for the gift and miracle of life; a sense of shared vulnerabilities; and awe before a force greater than the self that cannot be described in human language, but that can be deeply felt if the metaphoric mind is engaged in the process of being in relationship with form (bodies/stuff) and formlessness (undifferentiated mystery).

In this sense, forms of knowing (storytelling) contain spiritual energies. In this particular epistemology, these energies speak of the need for maintaining balance and harmony within relationships in the physical/spiritual world. Balance, harmony, and centredness are strived for and emerge during ceremonies such as the peace pipe, talking circles, sweat lodge, shacking tent, sun rise, vision quest, and sun dance (Cohen, 2006; McGaa, 1990), which can be sacred spaces where prayer, ritual, and story help define the conditions of organic survival and of existential evolution, as well as the laws, values, responsibilities, and practices for maintaining and renewing alliances (Bastien, 2004). These laws and alliances also emerge in relationship to Indigenous physical and spiritual landscapes. Bastien (2004) illustrates the relationship between places, values, and behaviours:

Niitaoni'pi' ki'tao'ohsinnooni means "how we recognize our land by geography." The relationship of Siksikaitsitapi to sacred places such as Ninnaistako (Chief Mountain), Katoiyiisiks (Sweet Grass Hills), and other presence (such as the sacred four directions, plants, rocks, rain, and thunder) are lived examples. Niitaoni'pi' ki'tao'ohsinnooni teaches Siksikaitsitapi the behavior or rules of conduct with these alliances. This is the ecological knowledge of the natural world; life is maintained through specific responsibilities assumed for the sake of cosmic balance. (p. 134)

Bastien (2004) emphasizes that the responsibilities for cosmic interconnected balance and for renewal of interdependent kinship relations involve the process of prayer, ceremony, and transfer through which spiritual knowledge enables the heart *to be in the right place* which, in turn, conditions the central cultural values of humility, gratitude, respect, responsibility, kindness, and generosity. The point made through this

metaphysical choice is that these values are not intellectual or cognitive choices that emanate from *knowing*—they are expressions of the undifferentiated force that animates and connects all things. The ceremonies, therefore, serve the purpose of centring, balancing, and disciplining the differentiated body and mind to *remember* how to be a conduit for spirit rather than an independent/autonomous ego in a quest for validation. Conversely, losing or being deprived of centring and balancing practices can lead to a *loss of heart*, a potentially (self)destructive existential disconnect that mobilizes experiences of insecurity, scarcity, weakness, and inadequacy. These can lead to contempt for others, self-importance, and self-hate which, in turn, breed fear, corruption, and aggression.

In practical terms, Oetelaar and Oetelaar (2006) describe *Niitsitapi* as a process of coming to know one's place and responsibility in the world as a cyclical journey through ecological pathways and traditional narratives that connect the outer- and inner-scape, fulfil social and ceremonial obligations, and transmit their oral history and natural law of relationship and protocol. The landscape is perceived as a series of focal points of spiritual energy where people renew their alliances. As a result, Indigenous people are a people of place, as their existential experience and storytelling is inseparable from the landscape.

> Myths and oral tradition explains how these landmarks were created through the actions of Napi or some other ancestral being. The narratives consist of more than creation myths; they also include morals and codes of ethical conduct toward the land, the resource, and the people ... the land becomes an archive or repository for history and oral tradition. As they move across the land the, Niitsitapi follow the trails used by their predecessors and stop at the same places to renew their ties with spirits and the ancestors. Such regular interactions with the spirits are necessary to ensure the annual renewal of the land, the resources and the people. (Oetelaar & Oetelaar, 2006, p. 383)

Thus, sacred science, culture, story, resource, way of life, and healing power emerge in concert with the focal points of spiritual energy within the landscape. The natural tradition, language, orientation, and practice connect Indigenous people through repetition with the all-inclusive organic universe, medicine wheel of life, and cosmic consciousness (Cajete, 2000). How this consciousness of life can contribute to mental health is exemplified by Basso (1996).

Basso's (1996) theory of wisdom demonstrates the connections between Native American culture and landscape and mental health and identity formation. Basso (1996) explains that *'igoya'i* (Apache theory of wisdom) involves the interrelationship between traditional landscapes, place names, cultural stories, and Indigenous consciousness. This relationship touches the person at the levels of the heart, spirit, and mind, which provides a

metaphoric "map in the head" and system of rule, value, and knowledge that helps a person cultivate what Basso called a *traditional mind* that consists of three mental conditions: *bini' godikooh* (smoothness of mind), *bini' gonil'iz* (resilience of mind), and *bini' gonldzil* (steadiness of mind).

Smoothness of mind is produced by the two subsidiary conditions (mental resilience and mental steadiness) "which wards off distractions that interfere with calm and focused thought" (Basso, 1996, p. 131). Mental smoothness and cultural wisdom provide a heightened consciousness that enables the person to make informed decisions in relation to contemporary experiences, detect threatening circumstances, avoid harmful events, and anchor one's being by connecting inner space, outer space, and mystery. This connection represents healing and wellbeing that starts with the reduction of the emphasis on rational thinking and the amplification of metaphoric existentialism. The continuity of cultural wisdom and mental smoothness are identified as two salient cultural attributes that position people's experiences within the modern world while staying resilience of mind and being well. (i.e., having a heart in the right place and feeling connected to *all relations*). Buffalo (1990), Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996), Graveline (1998), and Sleeter (2010) use similar medicine wheel symbols and healing processes to help people frame, visualize, and experience the decolonization of cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1998) and internalized racism (Jones, 2000) that is situated within the rational mind toward an alternative epistemology or existential consciousness that emerges through the metaphoric mind.

Indigenous knowledges can contribute to an existential orientation that *knows* the world as plural, complex, and animate and that is lived and narrated as *story*. As Bastien (2004) describes, "Our theory of knowledge is found in the sacred stories that are the living knowledge of the people. Each generation, however, must listen carefully so that they can adapt the lessons and wisdom that apply to the present situation" (pp. 104-105). Thus, knowledge and story (narratives) about place, people, and history contain systems of rules and values by which Indigenous peoples interpret, organize, and regulate modern events and relations. However, the manifestation of knowledge that happens as a result of this process is very different from modern manifestations (although it can be easily interpreted as very similar).

To understand the difference between Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous knowing/being, and to avoid entrapment of Indigenous knowledges in dominant (hegemonic and ethnocentric) forms of knowing, it is necessary to examine different conceptualizations of language that ground Indigenous and modern understandings of the relationship between reality and cognition. Modern conceptualizations of language

assume an objective, transparent, indexed relationship between a word (logos) and its referent. This assumption implies that knowledge about the world can be unequivocal and culturally neutral, and certain knowledge can be used to predict causal patterns and ultimately control the natural environment and even society itself (Andreotti, Ahenakew, & Cooper 2011a; 2011b). It also sustains the belief that alphabetic texts, especially books, are "the only legitimate way to record and transmit knowledge" (López-Gopar, 2007, p. 163). This dominant system of thinking mobilizes three desires (Andreotti, 2014). The first is the desire for progress in linear time, where some people perceive themselves as heading humanity towards a single idea of future (defined by science and technology) and entitled to territorial expansion, while other people are perceived to be dragging humanity down and in need of help, education, governance and *development* (which can be code words for colonization) (Andreotti, 2014). The second desire is the desire for innocent anthropocentric agency in the world—the idea that human beings (who are the centre of the world) have a divine mandate to control the rest of existence to make the world *better*. (Andreotti, 2014).The third desire is the desire for a type of knowledge that can describe, calculate, and predict things in objective and universal ways (so that we can achieve the first desire of seamless progress) (Andreotti, 2014). As a result, Western nations claim their narratives of being, society, progress, time, knowledge, and worth are universal *truths* rather than hegemonic culturally embedded narratives, disseminated through violent means and institutions such as the medical and residential school systems (Ahenakew, 2012).

In contrast, Cajete (2000) states that spiritual epistemology has accumulated through observation and practice with nature, and this experiential wisdom has been passed on through the generations orally. Oral traditions tend to conceptualize the relationship between a word and its referent very differently from modern conceptualizations (Garroutte, 1999). Rather than an indexed relationship, language is perceived as a symbolic representation of a dynamic reality that is beyond complete understanding, where each symbolic configuration produces a different effect on reality itself, bringing a different reality into being. Garroutte (1999) states that:

[d]iscursive performances not only shape the world, but the same text can do so in different ways, depending upon which reading is selected from the various possibilities available within it. Here, different accounts clearly matter, and they matter very much. New accounts are never simply a matter of an infinite regress of equally defensible readings: each distinct account is powerful. Speakers or writers assuming such a philosophy of language would have reason to take great care over the texts that they produce—because they would understand that, in doing so, they also produce the world—the Real world—in a very literal sense. (p. 954)

This articulates a very different understanding of knowledge production than modern conceptualizations, where the quest for empirical knowledge is framed as a quest for certainty, predictability, and control of the natural environment. In contrast, Indigenous knowledge production involves interactions with a constantly changing reality consisting of human and non-human relations (Ermine, 1995), based on the understanding that the creation of meaning about this life force will always be provisional, con-textual, and subjective. On the other hand, it is the life force itself that propels the creation of meaning, of a reality that is storied as tangible. As Bastien (2004) illustrates:

> [Language] is instrumental in creating the reality of Siksikaitsitapi by altering the order and structure of relationships toward balance. This aspect of the language transmits the transfor-mational consciousness of Siksikaitsitap…. Language connects the people to the experience of the dynamic motion of life. Kaaahsinnooniksi use praying with sacred songs [Naatoyin-naiysin] to connect with cosmic forces and to balance the structure and order of the universe. (pp. 131-133)

This philosophy of language proposes that language shapes the *real world* and our experiences of it. In this sense, this philosophy is already aligned with de Sousa Santos' (2002, 2004) proposition that knowledge and its value should be evaluated not as an adequate objective description of a known reality, but as an intervention in reality that acknowledges that multi-layered reality cannot be captured in language. In other words, language is subor-dinate to an indeterminable reality, but also participates in its dynamics.

Therefore, unlike dualistic and dialectical thinking that characterize knowing grounded on modern ontologies, Indigenous knowing can hold seemingly contradictory beliefs in tension, combining the rational and the metaphorical minds: reality can be both intangible (i.e., a mystery, as accessed through the metaphoric mind) and tangible (i.e., the reality cre-ated in the stories that are told for material survival). Prayer is a good example of this characteristic of language to both create and transform reality and, at the same time, connect with a force/reality that is intangible. As noted by Bastien (2004, p. 133), "Prayer is central to the ability of co-creation and transformation of reality; it is a way of aligning with the universal energies as co-creators of reality."

Perhaps language can be seen as a bridge between a spiritual and organic world—a bridge that, at the same time that it creates a useful dis-tinction between *spiritual* and *organic*, also reveals this distinction as a false dichotomy (Andreotti, 2014). This double (or multiple) meaning-making that is possible in Indigenous conceptualizations of language stands in contrast with (modern) conceptualizations of language, where language is sovereign and can literally describe tangible or intangible realities; or

where language/text is all there is (e.g., some postmodern conceptualizations), conceptualizing reality as non-existent, which, at the end of the day, is still a fixed description of reality.

Conclusion: Some Practical Implications for Researchers and Practitioners

Mehl-Madrona (2007) emphasizes the medicine power of language in altering realities. He advocates the inclusion of Indigenous narratives in scientific research and practice and proposes a *narrative medicine approach* as a way to understand and work with the life worlds of Indigenous peoples. Similarly, Kirkwood (1992) and Hunt (2000) suggest that narratives function to open the mind to creative possibilities whenever the experiences of people exceed the limitations of the scientific approach. Through story, narrative and metaphor have been used to connect individual problems to community concerns and redefine them in terms of the broader colonial reality (Duran, 2006).

This type of social reframing is important for Indigenous people and researchers, as very often the connection between wider social and historical forces and the imbalance and disharmony experienced in Indigenous communities is not articulated in mainstream research. This can lead to pathologizing practices that theorize the problems experienced by Indigenous peoples in terms of cultural or individual deficit. This in turn leads to (more) internalized oppression for Indigenous peoples, whereby the victims of colonization get blamed and blame themselves for the complex problems they experience (Duran & Duran, 1995). The narrative healing approach involves socially reframing contemporary incidents in terms of historical events so that Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities can understand them differently.

This reframing can also involve redefining individual, family, and community problems in terms of broader issues, such as colonialism, racism, and oppression (Hunt, 2000). This implies that, in part, the responsibility for a community's condition is shifted onto wider historical and social phenomenon, thus relieving survivors of full culpability or blame for family and community problems. By extension, this narrative provides a broader understanding of how the problem developed and creates new possibilities for how it might be resolved. The implication of this approach for Indigenous peoples is far-reaching. Hunt (2000) states that the aim of the practitioner (e.g., educator, doctor, researcher, or storyteller) should be to help peoples and populations:

to understand, accept or transcend their predicaments—to show that afflictions make sense, even if they are terrible; to show how illness [and suffering] can be mastered, controlled, or transformed ... or, when neither understanding nor control can be achieved, to demonstrate to the survivors that there is a way to continue with life, in this world or the next. (p. 73)

Hunt's proposal (2000) implies the construction of a historical narrative (Duran, 2006) and framework (Duran & Duran, 1995) that can provide a new state of consciousness or understanding that might open the mind to creative possibilities for Indigenous historical healing.

In the process of decolonization and Indigenization, Indigenous peoples use alternative histories, Indigenous metaphors, and spiritual teachings to construct narratives that make sense of their predicaments and map out adaptive solutions to contemporary situations. These narratives of resilience circulate stories of cultural power, authority, and practice (Sunwolf & Keränen, 2005). Individuals and collectives also make use of these narratives to articulate their identity and affirm core values, beliefs, and behaviours that are needed to face and overcome neo-colonialism and modern conditions (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011). These narratives "can help repair the ruptures to cultural continuity that have occurred with colonization and the active suppression of Indigenous cultures and identity" (Kirmayer et al., 2011, p. 84). However, there is a serious danger in the interface between modern and Indigenous engagements: if these narratives of healing are captured and frozen in modern ways of knowing and being, we may keep *Indigenous knowledge* (framed through an ontology that describes reality in language) and lose *Indigenous knowing* (and the possibilities of epistemological pluralism that it engenders). A spiritual revolution (Alfred, 2005) demands us to take notice of the ways in which our metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, and linguistic assumptions have been reconditioned by colonial encounters so that we can remember, regenerate, and restore connections (Alfred, 2005) to the gifts of our ancestors in experiencing (not just thinking about) the world differently.

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