

& the dragonfly was carrying a horsefly: mainstream resistance to indigenous pedagogies

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The following creative non-fiction narrative expresses reality as voice on the page, where I chronicle -- from within a gentle Indigenous value-system -- some of my experiences of racism in a Canadian post-secondary institution, experiences that lead to my "effective dismissal" from that institution after offering (but before actually teaching) the first-ever Aboriginal literature course in the ninety-year history of Mount Royal College in Calgary.

After that I couldn't write. I tried and tried...there was something missing. And I went around for four, five years, really frustrated. I could articulate it, but it had no spirit in it! I blamed the English language, because I felt that the language was manipulating me...So I went to the old man who's been my mentor, my teacher, my grandfather, whatever you want to call him...And he just laughed, probably thinking, "Why didn't she come here a long time ago!" "It's really simple," he said, "why you have trouble with the English language, it's because the language has no Mother. This language lost its Mother a long time ago, and what you have to do is, put the Mother back in the language!"

And then I went away, and I thought, "Now, how am I going to put the Mother back in the language?" Because, in our language, and in our culture, as well as Indian people's culture, Mother is the land (Campbell, 1975, p. 49).

my métis grandmother gave me a dictionary, an old giant webster's, for my fourth birthday. when she'd visit us, she'd sit on the phone chair where my mother kept the dictionary, in an open area between the kitchen and the front door, and she's hold that dictionary on her lap and point to a word and tell a story long as your arm. I thought the dictionary was a story book for the longest time, and I was so excited when I learned to read. I was planning on reading that whole darn book. but, it wasn't a story book, and even though I was disappointed, that's where I first learned to love words and to know that even powerful, mean-spirited adults used words incorrectly sometimes. I have dyslexia, so my introduction to the dictionary was fortunate in that way too. in my waking life, I understand no first peoples' language, but when I write, I know I'm part-way into my spirit self and I'm able to hold onto the english language like it's a gift held out of itself, unrestrained by prejudice or fear.

Native writers, tend, as Native people do, to use verbs and adjectives freely. This textured way with English provides concept and depth and warmth and fuzzy wuzzies. Helps us feel good, and just plain **feel**. And out of the subliminal influence of this style the spiritual circle is strengthened (Fedorick, 1992, p. 33).

live carefully
what we do comes back to us

english is noun-driven and is sometimes considered rigid and unyielding by speakers of first peoples' languages -- when it comes to expressing movement -- and movement is growth, life. for example, I remember teaching grammar in all-native classes, and trying to convince folks that, in english, fire is a noun, river is a noun, air is a noun, earth is a noun -- trying to articulate how these can be *things* -- is a tremendous challenge. I'm not going to say I've ever been successful. I don't get it myself. yet, writing is something I choose to do because it's something I need to do. I love language and I love to read, to write and to listen. I have an investment in the generations to come.

I say that tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. We are the canon. Native people have been on this continent at least thirty thousand years, and the stories tell us we have been here longer than that, that we were set down by the Creator on this continent, that we originated here. For much of this time period, we have had literatures. Without Native American literature, there is no American canon (Womack, 1999, p. 7).

when I was in grade school and high school, I read the books of countless white middle to upper class men (mostly) and women. until I was in my twenties, I'd read very few authors who weren't white. I read maria campbell's *halfbreed* several times and held on so tight throughout the seventies, but that was about the extent of my "other" reading. I started university in calgary in my mid-thirties and the curriculum was pretty much the same -- still is twenty years later. I'm not so sure my experience was/is out of the ordinary as far as being inundated with white middle to upper class information. I grew up in ontario and went to school from grade one to grade thirteen on an armed forces base. two major rivers join there, spectacular and wonder. the land buffered the violence I and many other children and women endured in that village.

show respect to others
each person has a unique and special gift

today, I receive canada pension plan disability because of post traumatic stress, which limits me to working part-time. when my kids were growing up, I was a single parent working part-time and a full-time student. I couldn't have known that my student loan of more than 40 grand would later be written off by a judge, much to my surprise and glee. yet, when my kids left home, I was no longer able to make ends meet, and, because I was single, I didn't qualify for métis/native subsidized housing. I'd been awarded a small compensation by ontario criminal injuries compensation board in 1995 for torture by ritual abuse perpetrators and by the federal government during my childhood. I still struggle with the aftereffects, and will all my life, I guess, though I try to focus on the gifts I received while making such unspeakable sacrifices so early in my life, beginning during infancy. an elder once told me when you're forced to sacrifice in such ways, the gifts you receive are ten-fold. I'm working on developing those gifts and becoming one with them. I'm working on finding that love and certainty that was inside me the day I was born. I'm hoping to live a long life so's I can accomplish at least some.

If universities are ever going to practice equity beyond the level of literacy (that is, writing down good things about equity), then...the university must come to terms with the conditions of my life as an "Indian" woman. It (still) means I more than likely got a late start at university (and this is the result of the history of educational exclusions of "Indian" people). It means I more than likely have greater family obligations including the fact that I am more likely responsible for more children and belong to an extended family in an active way. There is also a greater likelihood that I am a single parent. Further, the disposable income within my immediate family and my extended family is more than likely insufficient to support the family let alone provide additional resources to support me while I go to school. Attending university also has the unfortunate consequence of isolating me from my family if they live on a reserve (Monture-Angus, 1999, p. 104).

growing up, I excelled in school and I loved learning. during high school, the principal was jamaican canadian, and the student advisor was african canadian. from these men I learned that those of us who are oppressed have a perfect right to be and to move in this world, that the condition of our oppression doesn't ask us to "reason;" rather, we are asked to *resist*. when we're unable to resist, we must then come to know what's stopping us.

have patience
there are things that can't be rushed

years later I heard almost the same words from lee maracle, a squamish/métis orator and writer, who differentiates between "oppressor logic" and the logic of the oppressed. as is the case elsewhere, in higher education, to be paralyzed by oppression means you have to be believing oppressor logic at some level. oppressor logic says things like, accept your oppression as human beings; men are naturally aggressive; there will always be poor; there will always be racism; my parents and/or grandparents worked hard for what we have. oppressor logic is "truth" in mainstream consciousness, where in the university, students are made up of predominantly lower/middle/upper middle class young women and men whose housing, meals, transportation, entertainment, tuition, and so on, are paid for by their parents. the "truth" of oppressor logic is passed to these folks from their parents and grandparents, from their teachers and televisions, from their literature and histories. university is where, all their lives, these folks are told they *belong*.

unlike oppressor logic, the logic of the oppressed is human spiritual logic, the struggle for change. the logic of the oppressed most often comes from folks who are told, all their lives -- by middle class and "upwards" language and teachers and televisions and literatures and histories -- they *don't* belong -- not in university, not in management, not in government, not in academia, not in a million years. the all-native university classes I facilitated for several years flow from the logic of the oppressed. oppression hurts, and when folks dare to feel that pain, the healing hurts just as much. yet, time after time, students in my native classes would go to the source of the pain. the person being hurt has the authority over the hurt; this is understood. and unlike mainstream classes, I didn't have to "teach" native students critical thinking. there is an understanding that all inhumanity is intolerable. overall, the gap between native students' level of *response-ability* (a living word from Toni Morrison) and that of mainstream students is tremendous. the difference starts with the most basic of questions: ask a native student what she

or he will do with a degree and the answer will be, I plan to work in my community, I plan to help the people, I want to give back to my people, I'm going to school for my children, for my grandchildren, for the generations who follow. ask a mainstream person the same question and s/he'll start to talk about a good-paying job, a house, a car, money.

*take care of others
you can't live without them*

This is a prestigious institution with a prestigious MA program in Indigenous government. I am not a star student, nor a profound teaching assistant. Not much about me seems memorable. I pursue course after course. I comply day after day with research requirements, course requirements, marking requirements, and the odd seminar requirement, but nothing I do, say, or write seems relevant. I feel absurdly obedient. The result of all this study seems oddly mundane (Maracle, 2005, p. 210).

these are major differences. non-native students -- even folks from poverty and from of colour and marginalized communities, students who struggle with feelings of inferiority -- express goals situated squarely within a capitalist agenda. these oppressed students strive to "better" themselves and to "prove" they belong based on eventual material worth. education means success. success means money. money means power. power means, "I'm as good as you are." the logic of these oppressed students is still owned by oppressor logic. you can buy off the workers because they'll tolerate inhumanity in order to survive. you can buy off the middle class because they'll tolerate inhumanity in order to thrive. each is bound to oppressor logic.

*know who you are
you are a reflection on your family, your community*

this is not to minimize the struggles of those who come from the "lower" or "under" classes and into the university classroom, nor is this to suggest there aren't common values between native communities and those in poverty. the expression, "what goes around comes around," for example, is shared by both; and, "we take care of our own." a couple of years ago I borrowed money from a middle class friend in order to buy a car. I haven't been able to pay back this money. yet, since then, I've given away more than three times the amount I borrowed, no questions asked, no payback expected, to folks in my community in greater need. both my native values and the values of poverty moved me to make these decisions. I'm told by middle class folks this is irresponsible behaviour. it is irresponsible to know a single mom and her four kids won't be evicted in mid-winter? it is irresponsible to know a child will have his shattered jaw and teeth repaired? is it irresponsible to know a little girl who's so talented at basketball will have decent runners to wear? is it irresponsible to know that elders who help the people and leave nothing for themselves will eat this week?

now, I'm no philanthropist and these are not out-of-the-ordinary behaviours in my communities. sometimes I wonder how these values didn't get short-listed for the stereotypes associated with native peoples. those of us who come from poverty, both native and non-native, are told we create our own poverty -- an impoverished attitude brings on its own poverty, I was told by a white middle class male colleague. we're told we're lazy and we should work harder. while I was growing up, both my parents worked three jobs. try working harder than that. mention something

like the last several sentences here to a middle class audience, and we're told we're angry and bitter. we're told it's not that bad. we're told we exaggerate. we're told everyone has equal opportunity in this country. imagine that.

*share what you have
giving makes you richer*

being a teacher was not something I dreamed of becoming and even when I went to grad school I wasn't really aware that teaching was a part of my future. I just loved to read and write. and draw. I am a shy person, though people who don't know me well might say otherwise. I don't really perceive myself as someone who has a whole lot to offer in the way of lecturing knowledge. the learning I got in university rarely came from the teaching experience, that is, from the teacher her/him/self. most of my learning came from other students and from what I read. during my university days I continued the human rights activist work I'd been doing since the 60s. I was among the women who contributed to the opening of a women's centre on campus. I facilitated workshops on racism and classism and homophobia and pointed out all the white, heterosexual faces in the grad classes. I was born white skinned to a brown skinned mother, and I know how much privilege whiteness brings. I became known as a discrete and sensitive person who knew of the student services on campus and I had countless women approach me for help and support over the years. and I brought all this knowledge and experience to the classroom when I started to teach.

Aboriginal feminists take great risks and display real courage in continuing their activism. This intimidation is shared by all feminists who find themselves targets of ridicule, marginalization, and other sanctions including physical assault. However, it is a more profound threat for Aboriginal women, because the attackers deny the validity of their analysis as authentically Aboriginal. It is a painful thing to be labeled as a dupe of the colonizing society for undertaking to name and change women's experience (Green, 2000, p. 348).

*pray for guidance
many things are unknown*

and after seven years, I loved teaching. that would have been around the time when a woman in one of my all-native classes spoke up in class to say that, as a teacher, I was like nanabush in tomponson highway's *the rez sisters*. this was the highest compliment I'd had. in the publication notes of *the rez sisters*, it says "the role of nanabush is to be played by a male dancer -- modern, ballet, or traditional. stage directions for this mostly silent nanabush are indicated very sparingly in this script. only his most 'essential' appearances are explicitly set out (xi)." the text goes on to say, essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, nanabush (trickster) teaches us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet earth; s/he straddles the consciousness of the people and that of the great spirit.

*see connections
many things are not known*

it was just after this that things started to change for me in my department. I was approached by a white, middle class person I knew when I was a student in grad school. this person was friendly

and congratulated me for getting a sessional teaching position. when s/he asked, I said I was teaching both in mainstream and in the aboriginal program, and s/he moved back several inches and pulled his hands into her belly. s/he said, oh, the aboriginal program? I taught those people. be prepared to lower your expectations, be prepared to be really disappointed with the level of the work. what do you mean?, I asked. and s/he responded by saying, you won't last long. I didn't. no one does. I smiled and showed my imperfect teeth. I'm a métis, I said, and s/he swallowed hard, saying, oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't know. and s/he bolted from the room.

Problematizing the indigenous is a Western obsession. The discourse has shifted away from the cultural deficit views to cultural diversity views. Even within these views the indigenous can only be perceived as a problem because many are considered "inauthentic" and too ungrateful. The belief in the "indigenous problem" is still present in the Western psyche. It has been portrayed by some writers as deeply held fear and hatred of the Other (Smith, 1999, p. 92).

I was the only native person in the department at mount royal college here in calgary. I have blue eyes and white skin, long silver hair, and I'm indistinguishable from a white, so I "blended" in, didn't create discomfort among the faculty. after this incident, however, I began a process with the chair of the department and others who were like-minded, to raise awareness of the systemic nature of racism, and in particular of the racism directed at native people that included such blatant, open-faced ignorance. I submitted a course outline -- where I didn't hide my pedagogical intentions -- to teach a special topics course in native literature and the course was approved. students in this class would not only be required *not* to write in essay format, but would also be required to make offerings and to interview urban and reserve elders, visit urban and reserve archives, do extensive small group work, research the indian act of canada, the residential school system, become informed about issues of appropriation. they would be provided with the means and advised to attend a sacred teaching sweat lodge at some point during the term and their writing assignments would involve structured critical response statements to the required texts, films and assignments.

The acquisition of skills necessary for unearthing and then articulating meaning draws on knowledge from many areas, including oral tradition. Curriculum delivery must take into account the requirements of the primary traditional learning modes of "experiential learning" and "learning by doing" (Couture, 2000, p. 164).

*honour your elders
they show us the way in life*

but a new chair took over the following year, the same middle class male colleague who claimed that an impoverished attitude brings on its own poverty? he demanded I conform to his approach to teaching. stop with putting the desks in a circle. stop with the inundation of native authors and authors of colour. these were composition classes, for god sakes. the students complained and he had zero tolerance for student complaints. if students were complaining, I had a problem, he said. I carefully pointed out the detailed academic freedom policy of the institution and suggested perhaps we could hold a conference in the coming year on race theory, critical pedagogy and the pedagogy of the oppressed. I have elders I talk to when I'm unsure of what to do in the classroom, I told him, and even in our meeting together that day I was following the advice of an elder. I read a lot about teaching, I told him, especially from aboriginal authors and from authors who

practice critical pedagogy and/or critical race theory. he was not interested in the least. within a month he had the acting dean on side. within two months, I was "effectively dismissed."

*accept what life brings
many things can't be controlled*

Even after the Second World War, when the post-colonial period was beginning according to some cultural studies theorists, many indigenous peoples around the world were still not recognized as humans, let alone citizens. The effect of such discipline was to silence (for ever in some cases) or to suppress the ways of knowing, and the languages of knowing, of many different indigenous peoples. Reclaiming a voice in this context has also been about reclaiming, reconnecting and recording those ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden or driven underground (Smith, 1999, p. 69).

but it didn't end there. several months of negotiations between my professional association, the institution's lawyer, a human rights lawyer representing me, race theory workers -- and I was awarded a year's salary as compensation for my pedagogical faux pas (though I wasn't rehired). in my dictionary, pedagogy is defined as the science or profession of teaching, the theory of how to teach. the word is from ancient greece and rome, where a pedagogue was a slave who attended her or his slave owners' children to school. slavery is a big part of european peoples' history. the euphemism used was "feudal system," where slaves were called "vassals."

humor

I told this story to a respected elder in my community, an elder who has three degrees from universities in alberta. he said two things: first, he said their university system still models themselves after the "crown," where they cling to their 15th century notion of manifest destiny and the superiority of white upper class european boys who are left motherless at an early age because they are raised in boarding schools. their system is a disease, a cancer that's eating away at them. then he said, take a vacation.

so I took my little granddaughter, jessinia -- who was not yet one at the time, but walking -- to the native grad ceremony at the university of calgary, where I'm now working as a sessional in the new indigenous studies program. jessinia kept hearing this excellent laugh from somewhere in the large, noisy room, a woman's laugh. she even climbed up onto a chair and started looking all around the room for that rich laugh. she clambered off the chair and did the rounds. I followed close behind her. she made it almost all the way across the room before she reached her destination and positioned herself toe to toe with cora voyageur, looking straight up, waiting for cora to laugh again. cora saw jessinia and was delighted, laughed her beautiful laugh, asked jessinia if she could pick her up. jessinia practically flew up into cora's arms.

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