

BOOK REVIEW
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The Gifted Peoples: The Return of the Oppressed, or
Remythologizing Aboriginal Economic Development

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The *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* is a very important initiative that has enormous educational potential inside and outside the academy. The first such journal devoted to economic development and sustaining Aboriginal communities, it explicitly targets “those who teach and those who work as officers in the field.” It breaks new ground while also reclaiming and remapping cognitive, cultural, economic, and ecological territory forfeited to European colonial encroachments. The emphasis on teaching and practice is consistent with the methodology of the journal itself (available in online and print editions) and of Aboriginal business.

An impressive editorial team (with powerful connections to the academic and business worlds) has put together a journal that replicates the multiple strategies that drive Aboriginal business ventures and connect them to their multiple

and ever increasing constituencies. This publication attests compellingly to the fact that Aboriginal peoples have much to offer everyone, and not only themselves. They have traditionally understood dependency—as in “All my relations”—to be mutual rather than unidirectional, but that recognition has of course been denied or only intermittently credited by colonizers. The cruel contradiction of colonialism, whereby the colonizers have simultaneously asserted their own independence of and superiority over Indigenous populations while *depending on* and exploiting Aboriginal knowledge, resources, and skills, is currently giving way to the overwhelming evidence of Aboriginal independence, creativity, and capacity for collaboration (Battiste and Henderson, 2000).

Aboriginal difference and distinctiveness are being recoded and applied positively. Traditional

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and new knowledge is giving rise to new practices that are both confirming and redirecting basic and often oppressive notions like economic development itself. Development achieved how, and in whose interests? The double gesture of recognizing and also critiquing mainstream economics and development theory, means that an exciting intellectual, social, and economic agenda is emerging from a margin where its proponents are no longer content to reside, and in terms and in ways that those that are marginalized are no longer content to have defined for them or imposed upon them by others—whether by Indian Act, White Paper, or other means.

Offering leadership in new forms of communication, commerce, and community, the *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* is a model for that institution traditionally identified with leading—namely the university—which in much recent talk about becoming culturally attuned to diversity betrays old colonial habits of harmonizing or assimilating the “anomalous” to dominant views and ways without acknowledging, far less exploring, its own complicity in systems of domination.

Despite much rhetoric (and even education equity rules or guidelines) to the contrary, the Canadian university and business schools in particular have done too little to become the sort of inclusive institutions needed for the twenty-first century. According to a 1998 study reported in Ivey's *Women in Management* (Dec.–Jan. 2000), for example, only 10 of the 37 Canadian business schools that responded offer an undergraduate course in gender or diversity issues. The courses are evenly divided in their concentration on gender or diversity, the majority of students are female (70%), and in all cases the course is an elective.

What we need is not just a moving of the mental furniture in a limiting add-on or elective fashion (as in we'll add a class on gender and diversity or set up a separate program), but a radical rethinking of what we have inherited and do in the name of truth, reality, and knowledge deployed in the interests of university curricula or of the new global economy. We should never forget the violence perpetrated in the name of progress's linear path or other paternalisms. Or that “research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary” and colonialism has meant disconnecting Indigenous peoples from their histories and languages. It

has meant too forms of “fragmentation” that put Indigenous skulls in museums, art work in private collections, “customs” in the hands of anthropologists, and languages in the hands of linguists (Smith, 1999: 28).

Whereas the business world is responding to the opportunities and obligations of a diverse work force by developing new policies, programs, and performance evaluations and women are proving especially successful in Aboriginal business ventures (Newhouse and Pleasant-Jetté, 1999), business schools are marching resolutely, indeed very slowly, behind trends in the so-called real world, proving slow to learn from the challenge of women's and Aboriginal business. Instead of showing leadership, universities have much to learn from business—and from the *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* which offers a compelling model for integrating Aboriginal issues into business school curricula at undergraduate and graduate levels.

It is still too much the case that academic careerism valorizes so-called autonomy, disinterest, and objectivity, while thriving on the oppression of Indigenous or other underrepresented groups much as nineteenth-century professionalizing depended on the monitoring and measuring of the so-called underclasses created by industrializing Europe. What we need is not the preservation of purity or objectivity but forms of productive hybridity empowering faculty and student alike in modes of exchange both rigorous and respectful *and* effectively transformative.

Despite explicit commitments to interdisciplinary work and critical thinking, the university remains structurally tied to disciplinary and departmental interests and investments in micro-distinctions and exclusionary practices—and with profound consequences for what we know, how we communicate, and who we understand to constitute that “we”. As the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples argues, we need to understand economic development in less reductive ways:

[It is] much more than individuals striving to maximize incomes and prestige, as many economists and sociologists are inclined to describe it. It is about maintaining and developing culture and identity; supporting self-governing institutions; and sustaining traditional ways of making a living. It is about giving people choice in their lives and maintaining appropriate forms of relationship with their own and

with other societies. (RCAP, 1997 Volume 2, Chapter 5: 5; quoted in Anderson and Bone, 1999)

Indeed, the more invested disciplines are in their own objectivity, the more they seem blind to their Eurocentric bias and deaf to alternative ways of speaking, seeing, doing, and knowing.

In a brand new second edition of Lillian Chaney and Jeanette Martin's *Intercultural Business Communication*, for example, much is argued by way of apparently authoritative (and neutral) definition, including the following based on Jandt, 1995:

Diffusion is the process by which the two cultures learn and adapt materials and adopt practices from each other. This practice is exemplified by Columbus' joining of the Old and New Worlds. The Old World gave the New World horses, cows, sheep, chickens, honeybees, coffee, wheat, cabbage, lettuce, bananas, olives, tulips, and daisies. The New World gave the Old World turkeys, sugarcane, corn, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, pumpkins, pineapples, petunias, poinsettias, and daily baths. (2)

No mention here of the so-called gifts of colonization: alcohol, disease, guns, poverty, crime, violence or even the institutions of patriarchy, education, religion, law, and medicine.

Academic cultures of competition rather than collaboration further marginalize and under-resource Aboriginal, postcolonial, and women's and gender studies and discourage productive interaction in ways that leave the status quo intact. And there is, as Charles Coffey reminds us in his address to a CANDO symposium reprinted in *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development's* first issue, an enormous cost to doing nothing (127–29). We need a critical mass of faculty and a mass of critical students committed to changing the way we do business inside and outside the academy. And that means attending to the elders, story-tellers, professional, practising, and academic teachers (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal).

If as the Maori saying goes, our future is behind us, the *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* effectively recapitulates the colonial past to help us understand where and why we are—and where we might be in the future as well as how we might get there. The journal organizes its contents around four sections paralleling the multiple ways that economic develop-

ment is pursued in Aboriginal settings: Best Practice; Learning from Experience; Lessons from Research; Reviews of Current Books and Literature; and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. And the journal like Aboriginal business blends insights of contemporary thinking with traditional knowledge symbolized in the Tree of Life emblem that graces the cover and represents wisdom unleashed by the Sky Woman of Iroquois culture and connecting spirit and world and underlining the equality of peoples and parts of creation. Similarly, the journal represents the active and the reflective, while celebrating those nominated for CANDO economic development awards and finding nothing to fear in difference. And there are persistent reminders of partnerships and collaborations as well as the connections between “economic self-sufficiency and political self determination,” as Blaine Favel puts it (Lindsay, 1999).

As the *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* shows us, we are not helpless in the face of mysterious natural forces but can creatively reshape what cultures shaped in the first place. If ignorance continues to mean denial, resistance, and backlash in the mainstream media and elsewhere countering efforts to unpack and displace prevailing myths about Aboriginal realities and rights, tax situation, land tenure, etc., we need to redouble efforts to get alternative stories out—and to use every site and occasion to do so. Just as the *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* importantly recirculates the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to ensure that “the most expensive inquiry in the history of Canada” (Newhouse and Pleasant-Jetté) does not languish, so we need to ensure that this new journal secures the sort of prominence it deserves. For me, this means citing its essays, reviews, and commentaries whenever possible as well as using it and RCAP in every class I teach. It is with this commitment that I thank the editorial team for their inspiring model that shows us things can be done otherwise and successfully so.

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