

# RESPECTING POSTCOLONIAL STANDARDS OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE Toward "A shared and sustainable future"

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Displacing systemic discrimination against Indigenous peoples created and legitimized by the cognitive frameworks of imperialism and colonialism remains the single most crucial cultural challenge facing humanity. Meeting this responsibility is not just a problem for the colonized and the oppressed, but rather the defining challenge for all peoples. It is the path to a shared and sustainable future for all peoples.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The summer of 1990 marked a dramatic turning point for Canadians and First Nations peoples as the events of Oka unravelled a long silenced history of oppression among Aboriginal peoples. For the Canadian people, Oka had a dramatic and chilling effect. The barricades and the startling confrontations captured by the media portrayed the problem in stark visual form, but did not capture the complexity of or the history

behind the unfolding relations between Canada and First Nations people. Some months later, then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney established the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), whose mission would be to unravel the effects of generations of exploitation, violence, marginalization, powerlessness, and enforced cultural imperialism among Aboriginal knowledge and peoples in Canada. It was a massive undertaking spanning over a six-year period, mobilizing over 150 Canadian and Aboriginal scholars, and involving the deliberations of fourteen policy teams composed of senior officials and diverse specialists in government and politics (vol. 5: 296–305). Using interdisciplinary research methods and policy analysis and representing largely the voices and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples themselves, RCAP represents the largest research project ever undertaken in Canada—and a postcolonial project that remains incomplete but offers hope of “a shared and sustainable future” for us all.

In 76,000 pages of transcripts, 356 research studies, and five volumes of its final *Report* (1996), RCAP represents a postcolonial agenda

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for the government of Canada, Aboriginal peoples themselves, and the organizations and agencies that are supporting their development. However, the *Report* and its 400 plus recommendations still await the people, organizations, and resources needed for implementation. Part of the lesson for educators like myself is that the massive RCAP research and recommendations involve more than just the federal government of Canada, although it was directed first to government agencies. RCAP still offers the best current understanding of the nature of the colonial problem in Canada, a repository of historical records of problem-solving undertaken in the last century, and the effects of this paternalistic programming among Aboriginal peoples. RCAP also includes a multi-agency and institutional report, which can be used as a foundation for ongoing and future work. In particular, the Commission cites education most frequently as the agent for undoing and superseding the colonial myths and advancing the many potentially transformative recommendations.

As a Mi'kmaw educator who has worked persistently toward postcolonial education, I have found in RCAP an inspiring postcolonial model of scholarship for this century, and for the ongoing work of Indigenous scholars. It is a document of tremendous magnitude for it relates how Indigenous communities can use decolonizing methodologies in multiple sites of struggle. In this essay, I position RCAP as central to decolonizing theory and praxis in relation to education and economic or social development in Aboriginal communities. While there are many local and national examples of good work in this regard, as witnessed in RCAP, I also draw attention to the work of postcolonial thinkers and especially the Maori of New Zealand — their resistance, conscientization, and theory-making — to inspire and to give new, high validity language for the development agenda in Aboriginal communities in Canada.

## II. WHAT DOES POSTCOLONIAL MEAN TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLES?

*Postcolonial* is a term that constructs a strategy for responding to the historical experience of colonization and imperialism. In much of the literature, it is defined as liberation from colonial imposition, from colonists taking over lands and

telling peoples there what to do, but for those submerged in colonization, it is about removing brutal oppression and domination. From diverse experiences, postcolonial writers raise awareness about the processes of domination and the experience of violence and pain, processes of healing and coping, and visions of transformation of the colonized/oppressed in their resurging hope and struggles for liberation. However, the postcolonial is not just about mapping and diagnosing the past. To Aboriginal people, the term *postcolonial* is an aspirational practice, goal, or idea we use to imagine a new form of society. It is a symbolic strategy for shaping a desirable reality that we recognize currently does not exist (Battiste, 2000).

The conceptualization and strategy of the postcolonial among Third World and Indigenous writers are acts of hope, a light in the darkness of educational failure. To other writers in the humanities and social sciences, *postcolonial* is about rethinking conceptual, institutional, cultural, legal and other boundaries that are taken for granted and assumed universal, but in fact act as structural barriers to Aboriginal people, women, visible minorities, and others. Two colonial movements or histories are evident in postcolonial literature:

- Third World postcolonial (Edward Said, Roberto Unger, Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon, and others)
- Indigenous postcolonial (Linda Smith, Graham Smith, Gregory Cajete, Eduardo Duran, Sákéj Henderson, Leroy Little Bear, Sharilyn Calliou).

Both share the colonial experience of being told they should be something they are not. In particular, postcolonial writers have offered two kinds of discourse. One deals with deconstruction, or taking apart, revealing underlying texts or discourses and conflicted histories, giving voice to previously oppressed knowledge, and thereby providing explanation for experiences that were never as natural or inevitable as they were made to seem (the story of *terra nullius* is but one example justifying theft of land). Thus, colonial systems and their inner workings are disclosed so that they can be more effectively displaced. The other is reconstruction or rebuilding of the nations, peoples, communities, and individuals through multiple strategies and methodologies. These methodologies are as diverse as are their objectives.

Third World colonial writers offer, in their analysis of the Third World or southern colonial experiences, a deconstruction of history and relations, involving both the subtle and the violent means by which a people is subdued. Much academic literature across many disciplines is examining the colonial experience, deconstructing the colonial gaze and its methods of transforming subjects into objects of study, and the consequences for oppressed people, cultures, and nations, their terrain, territories, and ecology. In history, literature, visual arts, anthropology, for instance, postcolonial critique has informed new ideas and theories about the experience and offered new methodologies for unravelling those experiences. Indigenous writers, feminists, and Third World scholars have offered diverse perspectives and critiques of Eurocentric expansion and colonization. More recently, this criticism has begun to reach beyond the social sciences and humanities to the physical sciences, including the environmental sciences of ecology and biotechnology, and to economic development.

For many of us raised in colonial environments, unpacking this process of colonization and imperialism has helped us identify similarities in the experiences of those in other countries. And we have sought through many dialogues and international venues to discover what can be done to change the discourses and policies that undermine the human condition and community development. Some writers have helped us to see the larger picture. Writers like Edward Said (1978; 1993) show how the West constructed the East as the West's inferior, a manoeuvre which strengthened, indeed constructed, the West's self-image as a superior civilization. By creating the "other" with essentializing stereotypes, literary authors created the binary oppositions: civilized and primitive, irrational and progressive, despotic and democratic, and backward and moral. Henderson (2000) argues that the use of backward primitive stereotypes and caricatures was a necessary precondition to establishing Indigenous peoples as incompetent, landless primitives who needed the colonizing superior cultures, religions, and governments to raise them to a level of civilization. Using both theory of universality (all things derive from one European centre) and strategy of difference, colonizers justified their aggression and pacified the homeland while maintaining their control and dominance over Indigenous peoples worldwide. Those strategies

of justification remain in our institutions, in our society, and are increasingly probed and countered in cultural studies, feminist, antiracist, and postcolonial studies, and in other voices from the margins and borders.

Colonialism, then, is not just a matter of physical force. Gramsci (1971) rejects the concept of power as a sheer physical force and maintains that power is also an impersonal invisible force operating through a multiplicity of sites and channels (schools, government, media, courts, prisons, universities, research, etc.) constructing a pastoral regime through which it seeks to control its subjects by "(re)forming" them and in so doing, making them conform to their place in the social system as objects of power. This informs the notion of internalized consent and neocolonialism (Memmi, 1965; Noel, 1994). In examining the connections between Western culture and imperialism, Said (1978, 1993) has pointed out all Western systems of cultural description are contaminated with the politics, considerations, positions, and strategies of power. Gramsci (1971) called it hegemony. I see it as a form of "marinating and pickling" of the oppressed. We get so used to the position we are in, so comfortable with the status quo, that we can rarely identify it within our daily work or within the power relations we inhabit. We are so marinated in the schools and books and media, in the language, discourses, and vivid images — none of which is as neutral as it appears — that we come to believe and accept the images imposed on us, and find it difficult to re-inscribe any other image in the public mind or to imagine doing things differently.

### III. POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND EDUCATION

We continue to face the reality that every educated person has been raised and socialized (or marinated) within colonial systems of knowledge, both here and abroad. It is the responsibility and challenge of all of us to understand and counter colonial cognitive frameworks that have disabled us and prevented us from seeing far and realizing our potentials. Unfortunately, the problem is that all of us have been taught the power relations of our own location, our own continent or country. As a result, there has been no homogeneous experience that we all share to

help draw us out of the current structures of power without a full “conscientization” (Freire, 1970) of the process that envelops our thinking and our education. To this end, we as educators must be critical educators and learners of our own current structures and begin the learning process for changing what is embedded in our social constructions of knowledge and identities. We are all virtually new and continuing learners. Indigenous peoples must continue to learn from our elders, cultural leaders, and others about knowledge not cultivated in schools and universities. It is a knowledge that is not available through books, journals, monographs, theses, dissertations, or from Eurocentric-trained professors. Postcolonial thought and its methodologies for change are not in the conventional curriculum of schools. Rather, contemporary curricula are domesticated into fragmented units, thematically indexed, in glossy print with glossaries and dictionaries about dominant thought and power relations—still very much tied to Eurocentric agenda. In effect, there are few places, if any, where postcolonial thought has been ushered in as a foundation of education for the future.

A decolonized curriculum, then, is the shared curriculum for those who have been colonized and those who have colonized. To begin to think beyond the conventional curriculum requires something else, a *sui generis* school curriculum with teachers and administrators who envision themselves as postcolonial leaders. From there can communities begin to inspire new forms of transforming social and economic development, not the economic strategy of hand-outs from the government nor the economics of gangs of the streets, but creative and motivating processes that will enable thought beyond the welfare box many have come to know. Community development, then, is about ensuring that the knowledge needed to restore, renew, rebuild is drawn from diverse sites, communities, and collectives who hold that knowledge, and that it is connecting rather than fragmenting, and empowering within Indigenous communities.

Indigenous knowledge is not a monolithic epistemological concept, for many diverse nations, languages, and ecologies are represented among Indigenous peoples. There is no unitary Indigenous experience or perspective, no same production of culture or knowledge, and no cultures producing the same knowledge. Therefore, no single methodology has the answers for communities. What is clear, however, is that for

too long Indigenous knowledge, methodologies, worldviews, and systems have been neglected or ignored in education and as sources of development solutions for Indigenous peoples. These may serve as part of the solutions untried.

As there is no monolithic Indigenous knowledge, it is important to point out as well that there are no homogenous peoples or homogenous experiences with colonialism. Postcolonial writers have emphasized the diversity of experiences of people within colonial systems. People are differentially oppressed depending on their gender, race, religion, class, as well as sexual orientation, abilities, or other “othering” categories. We must be alert to these multiplicities and the location from which people speak, just as we should not use universals to categorize all Indigenous peoples. We are a diverse group and each of us speaks from many locations.

Indigenous postcolonial writers have significantly shaped my understanding of Aboriginal experience. In the work and writings of Indigenous authors and leaders, I have understood more fully the nature of colonization and the impact of that experience not only on myself and my people but also on Aboriginal peoples’ identities, on our communities, our relationships with our land/environment, and the resulting fragmentation, isolation, and alienation we feel. Postcolonial writers have helped me to understand colonial cultures and systems, the reproductive strategies of those systems found in the dominant English language and discourses, in the assumptions underlying a Eurocentric curriculum (cognitive imperialism), in the culture of schooling (cultural reproduction and hegemony), in theories of Indigenous capacity (culturalism), and in the socialization of power and privilege that creates inequities, underachievement, loss of benefits, and injustices. Most of us have lived that experience in most profound ways.

Linda Smith’s book, *Decolonizing methodologies: Indigenous peoples and research* (1999), is especially informative on the paradoxical position of Indigenous people. In critiquing the western interest in and academic gaze on Maori people as objects, Linda Smith examines a tradition all too familiar to many of us, wherein anthropologists, historians, or other conventional social scientists have created their disciplines on the backs of Indigenous people. Rather than have white researchers continue describing and labelling the Indigenous experience from within their own research gaze, she maintains that

Indigenous peoples should understand their own history and research in their own ways, writing back and talking back, and engaging education for their own purposes and in their own ways, and, more important, teaching non-Aboriginal people about the appropriate place they can have in decolonization. She urges researchers to undertake research, not for their own external or private purposes, but for its shared benefits with the communities in which they seek to conduct their research. She points out that the work of decolonization is not the rejection of theory and research or western knowledge:

Decolonization is about centring our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes (Smith, 1999, p. 39).

Indigenous research is derived from a different base of knowledge and relationships. When most non-Indigenous researchers do research, they have institutional, disciplinary, and professional contexts that frame their research. Indigenous researchers are judged on “insider” criteria — family, background, status, politics, age, gender, religion as well as technical ability. With these, Indigenous researchers then “tend to approach cultural protocols, values, and behaviours as an integral part of methodology, factors that are built into the research explicitly, declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood” (Smith, 1999, p. 15).

Among Aboriginal people, the evidence of postcolonial work is found in multiple sites. It is found where resistance to conventional practices and hegemonies is articulated and defended; where Aboriginal voices are raised to tell their own stories; where reconnecting with their own inner selves, with elders, and with family and community relations is part of a healing process. It is also found where reconstruction of language and culture is advocated; where new Aboriginal language curriculum in schools is emerging; or where history becomes inclusive of the Aboriginal experience, such as has been the case in the treaty curriculum of the Office of the Treaty Commissioners; and where communities frame their work in reclaiming, renewing, and restoring their Aboriginality.

This Indigenous renaissance is being experienced throughout the world.

Well before 1972, when Indian Control of Indian Education was accepted as government policy, many Indigenous scholars and post-colonial writers were imagining new restorative education and practices. Most Indigenous people understood the crisis they lived and felt the urgency for reform. They, like the authors of RCAP, have helped to illuminate an important key to reform in education, where Aboriginal peoples’ poverty and future capacity could be effectively addressed.

Each community must implement a full range of practices that will enable everyone to acquire an Indigenized postcolonial curriculum that moves away from merely adding on Aboriginal illustrations to an expanded curriculum that includes tribal histories, representation of Aboriginal experience, and even a critique of the system that excludes, the deconstruction of the prejudices held, the privileges that it engenders, and the ignorances it sustains. Such a decolonized education must speak loudly to diversities and creative solutions made possible when multiple views are put to the task. To do this, communities must be fully engaged in decision-making. However, how can this be achieved, especially when colonialism and school curriculum go hand in hand?

While decolonization of existing Eurocentric thought is under way in the works of many scholars, the Maori experience is significant in its double strategy of decolonizing education and enabling and sustaining the Maori renaissance and resistance. The Maori have emerged as significant models among many Indigenous peoples in their revolution that has swept their small country of Aotearoa, or New Zealand. Their revolution was not achieved when they had their Maori language and culture used as the language of instruction in their schools, nor when Maori language legislation was established that made Maori an official language in New Zealand in 1980. They currently have over 400 Maori schools developed. Rather, the Maori revolution was formed when they politicized all new parents to a Maori conscientization, a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) of the politics of their identity and their place and their personal role in making change in their country and among their people. All new parents became engaged in the struggle for self-determination and could see how their own consciousness

would have to change in order for their children to inherit the new spirit of their renaissance. It was not a movement that rejected all western knowledge and education, but it created a new space in which Maori peoples' knowledge, identity, and future were calculated into the global and contemporary equation of knowledge production and usage in New Zealand (Smith, G., 2000).

Three features of the theory of decolonization are framed by Dr. Graham Smith (1997, 2000), whose early work was cultivated in the emerging Maori immersion language nests. Through the work of parents and activists, they began to articulate the vision and purpose of language revitalization. Graham Smith builds upon conscientization, resistance and transformative action as fundamental tools to critical theory and change. Conscientization is about becoming aware, awakened to the reality of the existing hegemonies and practices which entrench Eurocentric dominant social, economic, gender, cultural and political privilege and destroy people's centre within their own cultural context. This conscientization requires a critical consciousness to activate questions and concerns about inequalities in society and to interrogate the cultural and structural issues evident in public goods like education, health, and justice.

The second critical tool is resistance or the oppositional actions needed to form shared understandings about collective politics. Maori people most clearly evidence a collective politic found in the Kaupapa Maori, a theory that embraces both theory and action. These collective activities respond and react to dominant structures of oppression, resolving and acting to transform existing conditions.

The third is a praxis or reflective change that is both reflective and reflexive with respect to theory and practice (Smith, 1997, p. 38). This last point is not merely about developing a critique of what has gone wrong, but is concerned with developing meaningful change by intervening and making a difference in everything we do and every site of struggle we take on. It is about thinking, reflecting, and dialoguing and dreaming with each other about our work and the struggles. It is about reflecting on what has been the role of schooling, what barriers need to be found and countered that have excluded some voices and participation in schools, and what perceptions do others hold that prevent

them from fully benefiting from what schools can offer.

What the work of the Maori made clear was that any attempt to decolonize colonized spaces and people and to resist actively colonial paradigms was and is a complex and daunting agenda. Indigenous peoples continue to strive for a decolonized context in a hysterically antagonistic Eurocentric canon, a context in which Indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledge have not been able to exist legitimately and safely. As Indigenous peoples bring forward their analyses, syntheses, and their solutions, a public discourse emerges in which Aboriginal experience of emancipation and liberation is contrasted with other peoples' "exclusions" as the mainstream tries to maintain its privileges, creating another form of difference and another set of obstacles to overcome. Becoming aware of how difference is named and classified is to begin to understand how hegemonic relations are asserted and how discourses of power operate. Indigenous peoples are too aware of the continuing threats to our existing way of life — the threats entailed in the commercialization of our Indigenous knowledge and heritage, and in the bias of modern thought and research — to be complacent about the future. Decolonization cannot be achieved without taking into consideration the historical context that has created the fragmentation of identity and community in the first place. Nor can a postcolonial framework be constructed without Indigenous people renewing and reconstructing the principles underlying their own world view, environment, languages and thereby redefining our Aboriginality.

To achieve these ends, we need protocols and practices that ensure that Aboriginal knowledge is not appropriated and domesticated without the consent of the owners of that knowledge. Each project undertaken in Aboriginal communities must have protocols and practices in place for accessing Aboriginal knowledge and sources, and regulatory frameworks for deciding what is appropriate to study or remove from the context of Aboriginal peoples. Not all knowledge is for all company and for all occasions. There is knowledge in Aboriginal communities that has special purpose and function and is owned by specialists because they have earned the right to protect it in special ways. There are principles and guidelines that programs, projects, schools, universities should use as a basis for deciding what is

appropriate for their purposes, including what can or should be removed or repackaged for other audiences.

Decolonizing education can and must be undertaken by everyone because all peoples' lives can be enriched in the process. This is not a call for Aboriginal people alone to do this. Nor is it to be done in one location or site, but in many sites and locations, in the many places where educators recognize the centrality of Aboriginal concerns, protocols, and knowledge. For Aboriginal people, their history, current accomplishments, future challenges, and enabling options will inevitably be experienced in contexts predominantly non-Aboriginal. Hence, all teachers and students need the assistance of the most current decolonizing scholarship if we are to achieve "a shared and sustainable future". For those who do not yet feel comfortable with the decolonizing task, it is each of our individual responsibility to request assistance in a dialogue of collaborative community growth. Such humble and honest requests rarely go unheeded, for it is the work of the community of educators who view education itself as inclusive to facilitate change as an enabling option for all.

Dialogue is not only a means to an end but must also be understood as an essential "product" as well, a postcolonial path where monologue and enforced silence have too often prevailed. But such dialogue must be self-aware and respectful. The fact, for instance, that many dialogues occur in the English language cannot be allowed to conceal the crisis for Aboriginal languages and the role of the languages in preserving, promoting and enhancing Aboriginal knowledge. Nor should it be allowed to feed a Eurocentric culture of presumption — namely that English is the medium of "civilized" exchange, the means of access to economic modernity and social progress. The language of instruction can also be the language of destruction, unless the classroom is a historically informed and respectful place. The patient and sensitive creation of postcolonial, transcultural contexts of exchange will enable education and economic enterprises to achieve the academic, economic, and social benefits and opportunities desired for themselves and others by the vast majority of Canadians.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the Canadian Constitution of 1982, the principle of maintaining respect for Aboriginal rights and treaties has been articulated. This is an important constitutional framework for those undertaking economic pursuits in Aboriginal communities. Canada has a responsibility to live up to its reputation as a compassionate and innovative nation on the way to becoming a truly just society. To arrive at this truly just society, we must recognize our dependencies on Aboriginal knowledge, values, and visions and our renewed investment in holistic and sustainable ways of thinking, communicating, and acting together. Our constitutional framework creates new ways to understand the ecology and new inclusive ways of looking at ethics and values.

Indigenous knowledge offers Canada and other nation-states a chance to comprehend another view of humanity as they never have before. It should understand Indigenous humanity and its manifestations without paternalism and without condescension. In practical terms, this means that Indigenous peoples must be involved at all stages and in all phases of our planning as articulated in the United Nations Working Group's draft principles and guidelines for the protection of the heritage of Indigenous people (Weissner & Battiste, 2000). Such standards offer each nation-state an opportunity for rededication to protecting humanity, redressing the damage and losses experienced by Indigenous peoples, languages, cultures, and properties, and enabling Indigenous communities to sustain their knowledge for their future.

Aboriginal peoples continue to see in education a hope for their future, and a source of their own economic self-determination as education fulfils its promise (RCAP Vol. 3, pp. 433–34). RCAP's Final Report, the dedicated efforts of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and other Indigenous researchers and postcolonial scholars and leaders, have made this much clear. No longer can institutions justify their inaction by claiming that "We don't know what they want" (Haveman, 1999, p. 70). The record is both ample and unambiguous.

The Constitution of Canada has affirmed Aboriginal and treaty rights, the courts have affirmed our right to Aboriginal knowledge and its validity in the modern context, and Canada has affirmed the validity of Aboriginal

knowledge in the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is a multilateral treaty that Canada has signed which applies to Indians as part of the exclusive federal jurisdiction (s. 91(24) *Constitution Act, 1867*) and as constitutional holders of Aboriginal and treaty rights (ss. 35 and 52 *Constitution Act, 1982*). It complements the existing treaty right and recognizes our constitutional rights. The Convention affirms a significant role for Aboriginal and treaty rights in creating national or provincial legislation regarding conservation and sustainable development. It affirms the importance of traditional knowledge and establishes an important role for holders of the knowledge in formulating law, policy, and implementation. Aboriginal and treaty rights are based on Aboriginal peoples' traditional and sacred knowledge, and together they forge an old *sui generis* sustainable development system that is now constitutionally protected. Appropriately based on the approval and involvement of our knowledge holders, Canada has promised to promote the application of principles of traditional knowledge in its law and policy and to encourage the equitable sharing of benefits among the knowledge holders or their chosen institutions. Now it is the challenge we all have in all our multiples sites of relationships, where we work, where we raise children, where we create books, where we choose discourse and language, values, lifestyles to use all the available tools to decolonize ourselves first and then engage that thought in the work needed to be done. It is also about new capacity building in economics and new capacity building through the law.

Postcolonial strategies have been taken up in politics and law, and are actually affirmed in the courts and by the Canadian government in the Constitution and in Canada's signing of international covenants. Postcolonial economic development then urges new conceptualizations of the strategy and a practice of transformation. It is an act of hope. Sakej Henderson pointed out earlier (see pp. 43–58) that it is a twofold project of re-conceptualizing the boundaries of current thought and re-conceptualizing those rationalizations that prevent people from making inroads. Whether it is in economics, or law, or education, it involves a tremendous amount of work among people whose experiences are quite diverse to undertake new ways of thinking about the old formulaic expressions

of law, education, and economics and make a fresh start from new locations taking into account the positionalities of those once silenced.

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