

THE ETHICS OF MÉTISSAGE¹

Dwayne Donald characterizes the “fort” as a “mythic symbol deeply embedded within the Canadian national narrative,” a symbol that suggests that Aboriginal peoples and Canadians live in separate realities.”² To counteract this situation, he invokes Indigenous Métissage, a “place-based approach to curriculum informed by an ecological and relational understanding of the world,” telling the story of a “rock known to the Cree as *papamihaw asiniy*” as one example.³

After depicting the “fort” as a “colonial artifact” that positions the “histories and experiences of Aboriginal peoples are necessarily positioned as outside the concern of Canadians,”⁴ Donald asserts that “universities and schools are predicated on these colonial frontier logics,” enforcing “epistemological and social conformity to Eurowestern standards.”⁵ To “facilitate the decolonization process in educational contexts,” he continues, “I suggest a curriculum sensibility termed Indigenous Métissage,” a “research sensibility that imagines curriculum and pedagogy together as a relational, interreferential, and hermeneutic endeavor.”⁶

“Doing Indigenous Métissage,” Donald explains,” involves the purposeful juxtaposition of mythic historical perspectives (often framed as commonsense) with Aboriginal historical perspectives,” hoping that “readers” – including Aboriginal readers? – “question their own assumptions and prejudices as limited and limiting, and thus foster a renewed openness to the possibility of broader and deeper understandings that can transverse perceived cultural, civilizational, and temporal divides.”⁷ Such understandings result in “ethical relationality,” an “ecological” conception that “does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other,”⁸ a crucial insight to support “decolonization,” disclosing “layers” of sedimentation of “experience and memory,” encouraging “historical consciousness.”⁹ For Donald, such consciousness represents “an ethical imperative to recognize the significance of the relationships we have with others, how our histories and experiences are layered and position us in relation to each other,” that “despite our varied place-based cultures and knowledge systems, we live in the world together with others and must constantly think and act with reference to these relationships.”¹⁰

Referencing his prior work with Cynthia Chambers and Eria Hasebe-Ludt,¹¹ Donald describes “métissage as a curricular practice that can be used to resist the priority and authority given to official texts and textual practices,” as it shows “how personal and family stories can be braided in with larger narratives of nation and nationality, often with provocative effects.”¹² The “metaphor of the braid (exemplified by the Métis sash and sweetgrass),” he explains, “and the notion of the métissage researcher as the weaver of a textual braid are integral to métissage praxis because they provide a certain unity of vision regarding the relational ethics guiding the work.”¹³ The

“act of weaving a textual braid of diverse texts provides a means ... to express the interconnectedness of wide and diverse influences in an ethically relational manner,” facilitating a “textual encounter of diverse perspectives that creates a provocative interpretive engagement.”¹⁴

Not a “solitary” undertaking, this form of *métissage* relies on collaboration and collective authorship as a strategy for exemplifying, as research practice and text, the “transcultural, interdisciplinary, and shared nature of experience and memory.”¹⁵ Donald names “intimate relationality” and the “implicative nature of experience,” as “key aspects of this work,” as *métissage* honours relationality as well as the curricular and pedagogical desire to treat texts—and lives—as relational and braided rather than isolated and independent.¹⁶ Indigenous *Métissage* is not Indigenous only, as, he tells us, the “use of the term indigenous does not connote an exclusionary type of *métissage* done for, by and with Aboriginal people only.”¹⁷ It is associated with “place,” as “affinities for significant places in the cultural landscape are often mapped through oral histories,” what Donald terms “place-stories” that function as “mnemonic triggers, locate and narrate the events of the land called home.”¹⁸ That land – associated with “artifact” – represents both “Aboriginal and Canadian perspectives,” reminding us that “artifact and place are rooted in colonial histories and logics that are both simultaneously and paradoxically antagonistic and conjoined.”¹⁹

For Ermine, being “paradoxically antagonistic and conjoined” connotes an “ethical space,” one where “two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other,” specifically the “fragile intersection of Indigenous law and Canadian legal systems.”²⁰ Writing in 2007, Ermine suggests that recent Supreme Court rulings authorize a “new partnership model of the ethical space, in a cooperative spirit between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions,” one that “will create new currents of thought that flow in different directions of legal discourse and overrun the archaic ways of interaction.”²¹ He invokes the concept of “two solitudes,” but “the autochthonous and the West.”²² Ethics, for Ermine, conveys the “capacity to know what harms or enhances the well-being of sentient creatures,” and “ethics entertains our personal capacity and our integrity to stand up for our cherished notions of good, responsibility, duty, obligations, etc.”²³ Ethics requires “serious reflection of those crucial lines we draw to delineate our personal autonomous zones and demarcation of boundaries others should not cross,” something, he suggests, “each of us knows,” as these are “spaces of our retreat.”²⁴

In addition to personal boundaries, Ermine points to “boundaries imposed by our cultural imperatives,” citing “Indigenous societies, [where] the Elders and the oral traditions provide us with the codes of conduct,” and “those ethical boundaries established by collective principles, such as our knowledge systems, the autonomy of our human communities, or our treaties,” adding that the “sacred space of the ethical helps us balance these moral considerations as we discuss issues that are trans-cultural, or trans-boundary in nature.”²⁵ After centuries of colonialism the “ideas from our

knowledge bases are so entangled and enmeshed with the other that we now find it compelling to decipher Indigenous thought from European thought.”²⁶ Moreover, “we lack clear rules of engagement.”²⁷ Among the “festering irritants for Indigenous peoples, in their encounter with the West, is the brick wall of a deeply embedded belief and practice of Western universality,”²⁸ what for George Grant would be “modernity,”²⁹ with its homogenizing tendencies.

What Ermine terms the “norm of Western existence, the norm of its governance, becomes so pervasive in its immediacy, so entrenched in mass consciousness, that the foundations of its being become largely invisible to itself,” an observation echoed by numerous European and European-descent critics.³⁰ “As Indigenous peoples,” he laments, “we have lost our most precious of all human rights—the freedom to be ourselves.”³¹ He suggests that Indigenous peoples “should act as a mirror to mainstream Canada,”³² but that metaphor is inanimate, a curious contradiction of cultural specificity and vitality.³³

Moreover, the mirror metaphor does not lend itself to Ermine’s conception of “ethical space” that is a theatre for cross-cultural conversation,” a “dialogue” complicated by “language, distinct histories, knowledge traditions, values, interests, and social, economic and political realities and how these impact and influence an agreement to interact.”³⁴ While Ermine complains about Western notions of “universality,” his substitute concept - “the equality of nations” - seems likewise universal, even absolute, no ongoing negotiation among “contrasting perspectives of the world,” engaged in “dialogue.”³⁵

Ermine characterizes “ethical space” as the site of “convergence” “disparate systems,” a possible “refuge of possibility in cross-cultural relations and the legal order of society,” with “effect of shifting the status quo of an asymmetrical social order to a partnership model between world communities.”³⁶ Kiera Brant-Birioukov reported that Ermine’s theoretical framing of “ethical space” and “ethical engagement” has been widely cited in Indigenous curriculum theory in Canada, including in the scholarship of Dwayne Donald, Jennifer Tupper, and Marie Battiste. Ermine’s concept of ethical space, she continued, inspired by her masters thesis, suggesting that

we can begin to not only teaching *about* reconciliation, but teach *through* reconciliation; insofar that ethics and ethical space dialogue allows us to respect the ethics of one another while still engaging in contentious debates that may lead towards a transformation of thinking and being in the world.³⁷

Is empathy – however complicated by cultural incommensurability - an element of ethics?

COMMENTARY

To counteract the “mythic symbol” of the “fort,” Dwayne Donald invokes Indigenous Métissage, a “place-based approach to curriculum informed by an ecological and relational understanding of the world” that facilitates “decolonization” via “the purposeful juxtaposition of mythic historical perspectives (often framed as commonsense) with Aboriginal historical perspectives.” Such decolonization creates as it depends upon “ethical relationality,” an “ecological” conception, Donald suggests, that “does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other,” a crucial insight to support “decolonization,” disclosing “layers” of sedimentation of “experience and memory,” encouraging “historical consciousness.” Donald continues: The “act of weaving a textual braid of diverse texts (recalling Dion’s concept of braiding: see research brief #2) provides a means ... to express the interconnectedness of wide and diverse influences in an ethically relational manner.” Changing metaphors – from “manner” to “space” Ermine names ethical space as where “two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other,” specifically the “fragile intersection of Indigenous law and Canadian legal systems.” He invokes the concept of “two solitudes ... the autochthonous and the West.” Ethics, for Ermine, conveys the “capacity to know what harms or enhances the well-being of sentient creatures,” and “ethics entertains our personal capacity and our integrity to stand up for our cherished notions of good, responsibility, duty, obligations, etc.” Conceptions of “ethical relationality” (Donald) and ethical space” (Ermine) denote dialogical encounter across the divides of culture, time, and civilization. As a curriculum practice and sensibility, *métissage* allows such a juxtaposition of contrary elements, braiding “personal and family stories” with “larger narratives of nation and nationality.” Is truth and reconciliation also project of subjective excavation and reconstruction?

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

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² Donald 2009, 1.

³ Donald 2009, 1.

⁴ Donald 2009, 3.

⁵ Donald 2009, 4.

⁶ Donald 2009, 4. Hermeneutics is a “Eurowestern” philosophical tradition that informs wide swaths of scholarship in curriculum studies: see Pinar et al. 1995, 422.

⁷ Donald 2009, 5-6. Juxtaposition is a key curriculum concept; see Pinar 2019, x-xi. “Temporal divides,” one would have thought, is (or was) a key cultural distinction between “EuroWestern” and Indigenous traditions, the former privileging historical time (at least since the Italian Renaissance) and the latter cyclical or mythic time, often place-based and season-related.

⁸ Donald 2009, 6.

⁹ Donald 2009, 6-7. As a concept, “historical consciousness” has a long “EuroWestern” history. To start see Seixas 2004.

¹⁰ Donald 2009, 7.

¹¹ Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Donald 2002.

¹² Donald 2009, 8. Recall Dion’s “Braiding Histories Project” (research brief #2).

¹³ Donald 2009, 8.

¹⁴ Donald 2009, 8. One wonders to what extent the non-Aboriginal writer can escape reinscribing a settler sensibility while braiding, or how that same non-Aboriginal writer can escape charges of cultural appropriation if including Aboriginal elements. For the Aboriginal writer committed to cultural revitalization, can the inclusion of “diverse” (e.g. non-Aboriginal) elements be counter-productive?

¹⁵ Donald 2009, 9. For the non-Aboriginal student, solitary study would seem to be paramount if one is to confront one’s internalization of anti-Aboriginal assumptions

and attitudes. Given how profound such internalization is - a fact underlined by many Aboriginal researchers – the claim of “transcultural” seems astonishing.

¹⁶ Relationality is a key concept in the scholarship of the American curriculum theorist William E. Doll, Jr.: see Trueit 2012.

¹⁷ Donald 2009, 10.

¹⁸ Donald 2009, 10.

¹⁹ Donald 2009, 11. Donald (2009, 19) emphasizes “land and place as key aspects of Indigenous Métissage and decolonization of curriculum and pedagogy,” reflecting the connectivity between place and identity, and how my ancestors choose to map their territory as a way to express who they think they are.”

²⁰ Ermine 2007, 193.

²¹ Ermine 2007, 193.

²² Ermine 2007, 194.

²³ Ermine 2007, 195.

²⁴ Ermine 2007, 195.

²⁵ Ermine 2007, 195-196.

²⁶ Ermine 2007, 197.

²⁷ Ermine 2007, 197.

²⁸ Ermine 2007, 198.

²⁹ Pinar 2019, 7. There are various movements against cultural homogeneity, including complaints registered by Aboriginal peoples and from European-descent public pedagogues such as George Grant.

³⁰ Ermine 2007, 199. European (and specifically German) critical theory – Horkheimer, Adorno, and others associated with the Frankfurt School – as well Americans like John Dewey all labored to make visible the foundations (and suggest strategies) of reformation of Western culture. There are many other traditions and critics as well, including contemporary efforts at critical race theory in the U.S.

³¹ Ermine 2007, 199.

³² Ermine 2007, 200.

³³ Ermine 2007, 200. A mirror is a reflective surface, now typically of glass coated with a metal amalgam, that reflects a clear image, hardly an accurate depiction of human beings. Ermine himself contradicts the mirror metaphor: “The gaze staring out from the mirror is the mindful look of Indigenous humanity standing as it is with substantial heritage” (2007, 200). A “substantial heritage” cannot be a glass surface.

³⁴ Ermine 2007, 202. The “theatre” metaphor has limits too, as it implies reading from scripts written by others. Without self-composed utterances (however informed these are by cultural scripts), dialogue cannot occur.

³⁵ Ermine 2007, 202.

³⁶ Ermine 2007, 203.

³⁷ Brant-Birioukov, Kiera. 2018, October 24. Note to Pinar. Vancouver: University of British Columbia.