

GIFT

Rauna Kuokkanen claims that the university “reproduces” dominant culture¹ and “in this way, it silences and makes invisible the reality of many indigenous students.”² Rather than focusing on the problems of Indigenous students, Kuokkanen will focus on the university itself, its “ignorance” and “benevolent imperialism ... its failure to fulfil its mandate in relation to indigenous people.”³ Replacing these failures requires a “new paradigm based on the logic of the gift as it is understood in indigenous thought,” inaugurating a “new relationship,” one of “reciprocity” and “responsibility toward the other,” after which “marginalized epistemes” will be marginal no longer.⁴ To accept this “gift,”⁵ universities will have to change, not “merely” including “indigenous epistemologies” but also acknowledging universities’ organization around “very limited conceptions of knowledge and the world.”⁶ There is, then, more than an “ethical imperative” operative here, there is an epistemological one, as Kuokkanen suggests “everyone” must be drawn into the process of creating new knowledge.⁷ Until that occurs, she concludes, “indigenous people will be voiceless – in the sense that their words will be misunderstood or ignored.”⁸

Misunderstanding of “the gift” seems possible, given that thus far it sounds closer to a command than a gift,⁹ a sense conveyed when Kuokkanen explains that the “philosophy of the gift foregrounds the notion of responsibility as well as a recognition that gifts cannot be taken for granted or regarded as commodities.”¹⁰ Indeed: the gift is “informed by responsibilities such as participation and reciprocation.”¹¹ In my European-descent terms, if one is required to reciprocate, what we have is not a gift but a contract; addressing this apparent cultural incommensurability could be helpful. Instead the reader receives another assertion: “There is a need for a new interpretation of the gift that can *force* us to question our predominant values and that offers an alternative to the current paradigm of greed, self-interest, and hyper-individualism.”¹² Recognition of “the gift” will, she adds, not only result in “respectful and responsible scholarship” but also in a “deeper and better informed understanding of the contemporary relationship between human beings and the natural environment.”¹³ Central to Indigenous experience, Kuokkanen asserts, is a sense of

the world as a whole [that] comprises an infinite web of relationships, which extend and are incorporated into the entire social condition of the individual. Social ties apply to everyone and everything, including the land, which is considered a living, conscious entity.¹⁴

This worldview is indelibly grounded in the “land,” as it acknowledges the “bond of dependency and respect toward the natural world.”¹⁵

Dependency and respect are evidently missing in the academic world, however, as Kuokkanen decries the academy's refusal to recognize Indigenous epistememes, concluding that: "too often, speaking in the academy is a monologue rather than a transaction between speaker and listener."¹⁶ Likening it to the potlatch, Kuokkanen claims, "the gift is seen as posing a threat to contemporary transnational capitalism,"¹⁷ a claim inconsistent with the earlier one that the gift goes unrecognized, that it "remains impossible,"¹⁸ as the academy remains incapable of "opening up toward the other."¹⁹

"Recognition of the gift of Indigenous epistememes," Kuokkanen declares, "calls for a conceptual transformation and ongoing epistemic engagement rather than restricted representation in curricula," rather in a way that "respects and accounts for the ethics and concerns of indigenous communities."²⁰ Western universities prize their intellectual independence; it is true that "respect" and "accounting" can be casualties of that insistence on academic freedom. Kuokkanen cannot be surprised when there is resistance to "the gift" when it comes with a responsibility to recognize it – what she terms "the law of hospitality."²¹ That "law" features "specific notions of responsibility and reciprocity," requiring "active participation," recognizing Indigenous epistememes "as gifts."²² There seems no "exchange" here, no "reductionist give and take," only "calls for the responsibilities of the dominant, instead of focusing on the special needs of the 'other.'"²³ What won't do is "mere respect and tolerance, by limiting itself to establishing 'inclusive' curricula and course materials, or by ensuring special access or indigenous studies programs."²⁴ What is required includes "addressing the contemporary realities of indigenous peoples."²⁵ How that can be accomplished – given that the university has institutionalized the worst of the West's cultural tendencies (in Kuokkanen's view) – is not obvious.

COMMENTARY

Kuokkanen recruits the Aboriginal concept of "gift" to convey the command that "conceptual transformation" occur through "ongoing epistemic engagement," a process many non-Aboriginal scholars support, but one that seems foreclosed if the university is as rejecting of Indigenous thought as Kuokkanen declares it to be. The field of curriculum studies seems to me open to Indigenous thought: for example, indigeneity is included as a key concept.²⁶ And, as you can see, I have positioned Indigenous curriculum studies first in these sets of research briefs. Of course, "engagement" implies critique as well as acceptance, but "conceptual transformation" seems assured.

REFERENCES

- Dickason, Olive Patricia and Newbigging, William. 2010. *A Concise History of Canada's First Nations*. 2nd edition. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Kuokkanen, Rauna. 2007. *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Wearing, Judy, Ingersoll, Marcea, DeLuca, Christopher, Bolden, Benjamin, Ogden, Holly and Christou, Theodore Michael. Eds. 2020. *Key Concepts in Curriculum Studies*. New York: Routledge.

ENDNOTES

¹ “Western conventions of thought,” Kuokkanen (2007, 2) asserts, “typically emphasize individual status and competition; in contrast, indigenous cultures place more value on consensus, cooperation, and collective identity. When seeking solutions to challenges commonly referred to as ‘cultural conflicts,’ the representatives of educational institutions usually focus on indigenous students; rarely do they examine themselves or the structures, discourses, practices, and assumptions that operate in the academy.”

² Kuokkanen 2007, 1; see also 2007, 51. Kuokkanen (2007, 53) asserts: “Most often, indigenous students learn to conform to the unwritten, unstated discursive and epistemic norms and rules of the academy, whether they want to or not. This may involve painful negotiation of their identities, cultural backgrounds, desires, and aspirations.” Not only Indigenous students experience “academic culture shock” – U.S. working class and African-American sometimes do, as do those from other lands – but it is plausible that the experience is especially challenging for Indigenous students.

³ Kuokkanen 2007, 2.

⁴ Kuokkanen 2007, 2. Kuokkanen (2007, 57) suggests that “episteme” is “broader” than the concept of “epistemology,” that it is “neither a form of nor a single body of knowledge, nor is it a type of rationality.” Rather it is more akin to “worldviews, ontologies, cosmologies, values, and systems of knowledge” that are “dynamic and constantly evolving, so it is impossible to define an indigenous episteme (or more specifically, a Sami, Cree, Inuit, or Salish episteme).” The point that “epistemes” are constantly evolving one appreciates but still: could there not be a “for instance,” however momentary, contingent, distinct? Why use a concept that is “impossible to define”? Indefinable, is not what Kuokkanen (2007, 66) calls “epistemic ignorance” inevitable?

⁵ Among Aboriginal peoples, Dickason and Newbigging (2010, 32) point out that “gift exchanges – ‘I give to you that you may give to me’ – were a social and diplomatic obligation.”

⁶ Kuokkanen 2007, 3. At one point Kuokkanen (2007, 74) declares the “gift” to be “impossible” in the academy, as the “university is an institution of reason, and the gift is perceived to be not ‘of’ reason.”

⁷ Kuokkanen 2007, 5.

⁸ Kuokkanen 2007, 5. Note how “voice” becomes dependant upon “recognition,” inadvertently reinscribing a colonial relation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Later Kuokkanen (2007, 74) asserts that “indigenous people ‘cannot speak’ in the academy,” a claim contradicted by the fact of her book, itself published by an academic press, a fundamental form of recognition by the academy of knowledge worth dissemination. What she means, evidently, is that, as Kuokkanen 2007, 74, puts it, Indigenous peoples are “compelled to communicate within dominant epistemic paradigms represented by the academy.” Is that what Kuokkanen is doing here? If so, does it misrepresent Indigenous “epistemes”? If so, what is the point of this exercise: catharsis?

⁹ Its double meaning is evident when Kuokkanen (2007, 48) acknowledges: “The gift, therefore, continues to be a *pharmakon* – both remedy and poison – in contemporary settings, including the academy.” *Pharmakon* is from the Sami language: Kuokkanen’s Indigenous identity. The Sami are also known as the Sámi or the Saami, historically known in English as Lapps or Laplanders.

¹⁰ Kuokkanen 2007, 23.

¹¹ Kuokkanen 2007, 23.

¹² Kuokkanen 2007, 24, emphasis added.

¹³ Kuokkanen 2007, 26.

¹⁴ Kuokkanen 2007, 32.

¹⁵ Kuokkanen 2007, 33.

¹⁶ Kuokkanen 2007, 81. Kuokkanen’s book does not exactly encourage “dialogue.”

¹⁷ Kuokkanen 2007, 88.

¹⁸ Kuokkanen 2007, 108.

¹⁹ Kuokkanen 2007, 115. In this book, Kuokkanen provides no model of “opening up,” appearing entirely closed to “the West,” yet quite willing to accept professorships – a Western concept - both in Canada and Finland.

²⁰ Kuokkanen 2007, 120.

²¹ Kuokkanen 2007, 127. Earlier Kuokkanen (2007, 76) insists that “hospitality is not possible when the guest is required to speak the language of the host.”

²² Kuokkanen 2007, 129.

²³ Kuokkanen 2007, 129. It is not obvious – at least in “Western” culture – how gift can be a gift if its acceptance is obligatory, and that compulsory acceptance translates into obligation.

²⁴ Kuokkanen 2007, 138. “Unconditional welcome,” she continues, “must be propelled into action by a commitment to responsibility toward the ‘other,’ be it a guest or a host.” What “responsibility toward the [Western] ‘other,’” is evident in the Kuokkanen text?

²⁵ Kuokkanen 2007, 161.

²⁶ Wearing et al. 2020, 123.