

# MEDIATION

Educational reforms in Saskatchewan, Lisa Comeau argued, “re/produce colonial power relations as the consumption of cultural differences, by a dominant and normative white Anglo center, in the name of the well-being of cultural Others and the nation as a whole.”<sup>1</sup> Such “consumption” took form historically through racial hegemony: white, British, English-speaking Protestants settlers took themselves as normative.<sup>2</sup> Through “character education” and “moral reform” the Indigenous – considered “racially degenerate – could be incorporated into dominant culture.<sup>3</sup> Such genocide continues today, Comeau suggests, through discourses of “culture and multiculturalism,”<sup>4</sup> asserting there is a “cyclical connection between the two discourses of culture,” as both “perform the political work of keeping Aboriginal people, poor people, and white, middle class people in their respective places.”<sup>5</sup> What Comeau calls “traditional culture” is “commodified and objectified ... available for consumption—an object of knowledge to be taught and learned about in classrooms.”<sup>6</sup>

As reproductive of the colonial status quo as Comeau understands “consumption” to be, can it not be distinguished – as subtler but maybe more totalizing - from the 1883 attitude of the first Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald, whom Lorenzo Cherubini quotes?

It has been strongly pressed on myself ... that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.<sup>7</sup>

Cherubini then links the “demise of Aboriginal worldviews, traditions and cultures” to the policy strategy of the imperial government,” among the instruments of which were the residential schools, operated by the various churches and missions commissioned by the government.<sup>8</sup>

Cherubini wonders about the fate of the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) calls to action - will the general public embrace them?<sup>9</sup> - given the “civic distrust” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.<sup>10</sup> The “general public,” he points out, must “be willing to authentically reflect upon the historical and contemporary truths referred to in the [TRC] document,”<sup>11</sup> indeed “admitting their responsibility to the countless historical wrongdoings and to the adverse present-day circumstances experienced by some Aboriginal peoples.”<sup>12</sup>

Given the history, scale and intensity of the challenge educators face, what can a teacher do? Camie Augustus examined the “pedagogical challenges” educators faced teaching university undergraduate comparative Indigenous studies courses,<sup>13</sup> proposing a concept of “knowledge liaisons” to serve as a “teaching model” that might

address such challenges.<sup>14</sup> Acknowledging efforts to construct Indigenous pedagogies, Augustus points out that “there are still matters to resolve regarding the importance of content,” a “need” that “comes on top of calls to teach from Indigenous perspectives.”<sup>15</sup> Indigenous pedagogies are, Augustus continues, centred around five themes: (1) place, (2) “community and kinship,” (3) “language,” (3) “holistic teaching pedagogies (which include concepts such as interconnectedness, spiritual and emotional growth, social engagement, and learning as a lifelong process),” and (5) “decolonization, both as a process of individual and social change and as introducing specific content.”<sup>16</sup> While vocational education is focused on teaching “specific marketable skills to meet labour demands,” Augustus continues, in Indigenous courses teachers “seek to achieve understanding among students, and sometimes simply to impart knowledge.”<sup>17</sup>

Animating such teaching for “understanding” are aspirations for “self-determination and decolonization,” requiring “teaching basic content to a degree perhaps not seen in many other disciplines,” as educators cannot expect students to “understand the fundamental concepts of colonialism.”<sup>18</sup> Augustus continues:

While teaching trends have turned away from content-based approaches, I argue that it is a necessary component of effective teaching in global Indigenous courses wherein empirical information about people and places forms the basis of opportunities to learn skills and to meet the goals of decolonization. That information is, for its own sake, especially important when we are dealing with rights violations and historical injustices, where awareness alone can lead to the kinds of changes we are seeking, or at the very least offer a first step.<sup>19</sup>

Concepts such as “voice” remain important – as do concerns over cultural appropriation - but, Augustus notes, “given the range and number of Indigenous communities and cultures represented over the semester ... it could not be the *only* voice through which information was channelled,” as teaching cannot always coincide with “first-hand experience.”<sup>20</sup>

Given this positioning, the educator is less the expert (in that sense of “first-hand experience”) than “mediator,” a shift in role Augustus links to the concept of “knowledge liaisons,” wherein “one who negotiates and translates vast stores of information and provides a broader context for specific and local examples.”<sup>21</sup> Acting as the “liaison” - she also invoked the concept of “broker” - instead of the “expert,” Augustus suggests, exempts educators from charges of appropriation (“taking ownership of it”).<sup>22</sup>

Working from Sue Crowley’s “three levels of analysis,” Augustus characterizes the “experience of individuals or communities” as the “micro level,” the “national or international arena” as the “macro level,” and the “themes” as “context,” enabling her to “connect (or “liaise between” to maintain the analogy) local, Indigenous-based

knowledge and pedagogy within broader national and global content, and with comparative and international approaches to understanding colonialism and decolonization.”<sup>23</sup> These juxtapositions result, Augustus suggests, in students’ understanding of global patterns while still acknowledging and respecting local difference and cultural sovereignty.”<sup>24</sup> Augustus returns to the (non-Indigenous) educator as mediator facilitating knowledge liaisons when she concludes: “By shifting our positions as university teachers as well as our attitudes about authority and expertise, we can better begin to address Indigenous methodologies without abandoning the needs of students or the demands of higher education’s goals.”<sup>25</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

Given the destruction of Aboriginal culture – the cultural genocide Comeau and Cherubini chronicle - it is not clear what place there can be for agency, especially for non-Aboriginal teachers, but Augustus’ invocation of educator as mediator – “knowledge liaison” - suggests one. The concept hardly resolves the matter, but it does create a space wherein educators (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) can move, provided their erudition enables them to communicate knowledge of most worth. That seems to me the second significance of Augustus’ analysis, that, contrary’s to progressivism’s devaluation of it, content matters.

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## ENDNOTE

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<sup>1</sup> Comeau 2005, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Comeau 2005, 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Comeau 2005, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Comeau 2005, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Comeau 2005, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Comeau 2005, 22. Learning “about” risks the commodification of what is studied, George Grant cautioned, leading him to counsel teaching from within knowledge, not proselytizing but teaching from within one’s engagement with it: see Pinar 2019a, 221-222.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Cherubini 2016, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Cherubini 2016, 35. For an in-depth account of the churches’ “good intentions gone awry,” see Hare and Barman 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Cherubini 2016, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Cherubini 2016, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Cherubini 2016, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Cherubini 2016, 38.

<sup>13</sup> Augustus 2015, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Augustus 2015, 2. Augustus works from Crowley 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Augustus 2015, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Augustus 2015, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Augustus 2015, 5. What Augustus is describing as Indigenous is also the European tradition of liberal arts education; see, for instance, Roth 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Augustus 2015, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Augustus 2015, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Augustus 2015, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Augustus 2015, 8. I liken teachers to professional journalists in that we not only

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present information, we “amplify, contextualize, and synthesize information” (2019b, vii.)

<sup>22</sup> Augustus 2015, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Augustus 2015, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Augustus 2015, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Augustus 2015, 11.