

ACTIVATION THROUGH AFFIRMATION

Marie Battiste and Youngblood Henderson's acknowledge "a growing, purposeful, and political act of empowerment by Indigenous peoples," requiring Indigenous scholars and educators to "affirm and activate holistic paradigms of Indigenous knowledge," excluded, they assert (despite the scholarship of John P. Miller¹), from "Eurocentric knowledge (EK)."² In fact, Battiste and Youngblood Henderson cast "EK" as the "opposite of IK,"³ requiring Indigenous scholars reject "EK" and turn to "IK and Elders to restore control over Indigenous development and capacity enhancement using Indigenous forms of their research and methodologies."⁴ What Indigenous scholars discover, Battiste and Youngblood Henderson report, is that "IK is far more than the binary opposite of EK," as it "fills the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education, research, and scholarship."⁵ As for many European and European-descent educators – and for second and third generation Indigenous educators – "social justice, equity, and antiracist education have inspired the first generation of Indigenous scholars and professionals to expose successfully the Eurocentric prejudices against IK and contribute to the activation of a renewed interest in IK in every Eurocentric discipline and profession."⁶

While at first Battiste and Youngblood Henderson sound close to endorsing an inversion of the hierarchy of "EK" and "IK," later they suggest that the "immediate challenge in higher education is how to *balance* colonial legitimacy, authority, and disciplinary capacity with IK and pedagogies."⁷ This appears to be not only a political question but a curricular one, as "IK creates potential for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners ... that EK alone cannot do."⁸

There can be no "balance," of course, unless "IK" is present in the curriculum, and that cannot occur, Battiste points out, unless Aboriginal languages are preserved, part of a "transformed curriculum that embraces the rich diversity of knowledge and provides the necessary consciousness to enable Aboriginal humanity to be respected and protected."⁹ That humanity cannot be protected unless Aboriginal languages are protected, as they provide the "deep and lasting cognitive bonds that affect all aspects of Aboriginal life," including "common ideals [that] creates a collective cognitive experience for tribal societies that is understood as tribal epistemology."¹⁰

Such "epistemology" enables "awareness that beyond the immediate sensible world of perception, memory, imagination, and feelings lies another world from which knowledge, power, or medicine is derived from which the Aboriginal peoples will survive and flourish."¹¹ Such knowledge is discredited by a "cognitive imperialism" that "denies" Aboriginal peoples "their language and cultural integrity and maintains legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference."¹² Battiste again comes close to inverting this stage of affairs when she complains that "the *Other* is acknowledged as *a* knowledge, not *the* knowledge, as in the case of academia's special

case studies such as Women's Studies, Native Studies, or Black Studies."¹³ She calls this the "add-and-stir" model of education, one that disables students from reconciling "their position in society or find the awareness or means to overcome the root problems of their oppression."¹⁴

Battiste alleges that "most teachers in public schools have neither taken courses about and from Indigenous peoples nor developed awareness of cross-cultural realities," leaving them unable to meaningfully include Aboriginal knowledge in the curriculum.¹⁵ A "postcolonial framework" is required, one predicated upon "Indigenous people's renewing and reconstructing the principles underlying their own world view, environment, languages, and how these construct our humanity," and these cannot occur without "linguistic competence" in Indigenous languages that "offer not just a communication tool for unlocking knowledge; they offer a process of orientation that removes us from rigid noun-centered reality and offers an unfolding paradigmatic process for restoration and healing," a "reality of transformation and change in its holistic representations and processes that stress interaction, reciprocity, respect, and non-interference."¹⁶

Fifteen years later Battiste worked with these ideas in more detail, contextualizing the curriculum question in "more than a century ... of forced assimilation."¹⁷ Taught – in "residential schools and day schools in the first half of the last century" and the "integrative approaches of the second half of that century" – to "distrust their Indigenous knowledge systems, their elders' wisdom, and their own inner learning spirit, now Indigenous students struggle: in 2006, she reports, only 30 per cent of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit had received a certificate, diploma, or degree, compared to 50 per cent of non-Aboriginal Canadians.

The global decolonization and human rights movements have seen "Indigenous thinkers ... prove that the received Eurocentric notion of culture as unchanging and homogeneous was not only mistaken but irrelevant."¹⁸ Yet Canadian curricula, Battiste continues, have "not yet ensured that non-Indigenous children develop an accurate understanding of the Indigenous peoples in Canada and their knowledge systems."¹⁹ The problem lay not with Aboriginal students, Battiste insists, but educators' projections onto them of a "lack of capacity," an expression of Eurocentric "power and privilege."²⁰ Despite "many promising practices" – focused on "culturally inclusive curricula affecting attitudes, motivation, and retention of Aboriginal students" – institutions have yet to interrogate the existing cultural interpretative monopoly of Eurocentric knowledges, assumptions, and methodologies."²¹ Despite the dominance of "difference" – cultural, political, gendered, racialized – within contemporary European and European-descent cultures – "difference" both celebrated (by the Left) and demeaned (by the Right) – Battiste points to only its right-wing reading as deviation, "as aberrations from the normative Eurocentric cultural traditions."²²

Colonialism is no historical phenomenon, Battiste, argues, as it remains embedded in contemporary relationships of "power, voice, and legitimacy," requiring

“decolonization ... a process of unpacking the keeper current in education: its powerful Eurocentric assumptions of education,”²³ assumptions that ignore Indigenous “science derived from relationships with nature and with the energies within an ecosystem, including their relationships with each other and with their environment.”²⁴ She explains:

This worldview flows from the same source: the relationship within the flux, a kinship with the other living creatures and life energies embodied in their land, and a kinship with the spirit world. Over time, the knowledge manifests itself in many other social forms and processes: stories, symbolic and creative manifestations, technologies, ways of being and learning, traditions, and ceremonies.²⁵

Prerequisite to the survival of this worldview is language.

Battiste posits Indigenous languages as “the most significant factor in the survival of Indigenous knowledge and culture,” this time pointing to their subjectively structuring function, in the “unconscious.”²⁶ Without Indigenous language, she asserts, Indigenous students “have difficulty learning,” and indigenous knowledge “will struggle to survive.”²⁷ Taught and tested in their “second language,” Indigenous students are “at a disadvantage,”²⁸ and when their test scores do not match those being tested in their “mother tongue,”²⁹ they are “labeled ‘at risk,’ ‘slow learners,’ or children targeted for ‘resource’ programs.”³⁰

“Almost all North American Aboriginal languages,” Battiste explains, “fundamentally operate from a view of the world as interrelated and in flux, signifying these relations in highly descriptive prefixes and suffixes with the verbs,” adding that “some might even say these are verb-based languages.”³¹ But, she asserts, “most school curricula and experience is focused on noun-based learning ... fraught with classifications, categories, and components of all kinds that are developed in all aspects of the curriculum,”³² a form of “cognitive imperialism.”³³ As a consequence, she continues, “cultural minorities in Canada have been led to believe that their poverty and powerlessness are the result of their cultural and racial origins rather than the power relations that create inequality in a capitalistic economy.”³⁴

“Knowledge is not secular,” Battiste asserts, and “it has a sacred purpose,” as it is embedded in “all of nature, to its creatures, and to human existence.”³⁵ Moreover, “knowledge teaches people how to be responsible for their own lives, develops their sense of relationship to others, and helps them model competent and respectful behavior.”³⁶ Encoded in “traditions, ceremonies, and daily observations” learning and knowledge become “spirit-connecting processes that enable the gifts, visions, and spirits to emerge in each person.”³⁷

As educators engage with Indigenous knowledge and learning, Battiste suggests that “new processes” will be needed, among them the “raising the collective voice of

Indigenous peoples” while “exposing the injustices in our colonial history,” and “communicating the emotional journey that such explorations will generate.³⁸ This ambitious undertaking will require “Canadian administrators and educators” to “respectfully blend Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy with Euro-Canadian epistemology and pedagogy,” resulting in “an innovative ethical, trans-systemic Canadian educational system.”³⁹

Such “blending,” she continues, involves “three processes,” the first “respect the “diversity of Indigenous knowledge’s protocols, preparations, and purposes,” the second “understanding the multi-levels of preparation and purpose in transmitting Indigenous knowledge,” and third “developing constitutional and ethical responsibilities for those researching Indigenous knowledge.”⁴⁰ She adds that “Elders” will prove “indispensable” to this educational labor, as the “ceremonies, and rituals required for teaching certain parts of Indigenous knowledge will confront the existing tension about teaching religion in secular public schools.”⁴¹

To confront this “tension,” Battiste suggests, “First Nations people must be involved at all stages and in all phases of education planning and future governing,” offering opportunities to “Canadians to rededicate themselves,” thereby “protecting First Nations knowledge and heritage, redressing the damage and losses of First Nations peoples from their language, culture, and properties, and enabling First Nations heritage and knowledge to offer Canada and the provinces a chance to create an authentic educational system which comprehends an inclusive view of humanity.”⁴²

Such a scale of aspiration requires “understanding dominance and superiority within the context of history and their continued dominance in contemporary knowledge,” as well as understanding “Aboriginal learning and learners, their holistic theories of lifelong learning.”⁴³ Again: key to such “reform” is the preservation of Aboriginal languages, as they contain “the collected wisdom and knowledge that enables Aboriginal people to survive and flourish.”⁴⁴

Prominent among these, Battiste continues, are the following “distinctive features,” including “learning by observation and doing, learning through authentic experiences and individualized instruction, and learning through enjoyment.”⁴⁵ Battiste cautions against “petrifying, oversimplifying, or mystifying Indigenous knowledge systems by stressing their normative content or ‘sacredness’.”⁴⁶ Educators, she concludes, have the “ethical responsibility of educators to acknowledge and expand student identities,” the latter implying a cosmopolitan curriculum.⁴⁷ Sounding for the moment like a Protestant – with that religious tradition’s emphasis upon each person’s personal relationship with God – Battiste insists that educators acknowledge that “each person has a unique and personal journey that will yield to their learning so that they find a way to express fully their own purpose, vision, and journey.”⁴⁸ Battiste points out that decolonization requires realization of the continuing “dominance” of “Eurocentric assumptions” in “all forms of contemporary knowledge,”⁴⁹ including, apparently, Aboriginal knowledge. “In the dynamics of Indigenous knowledge,”

Battiste concludes, “purposeful, meaningful lives are dignified and spiritual.”⁵⁰

COMMENTARY

After a blistering attack on curriculum in Canada, Battiste proposes a curricular “blending” of Aboriginal and non-aboriginal knowledge, a term apparently consonant with Dion’s conception of braiding. (Battiste also asks for “balance,” implying that distinctive elements do remain distinctive.) Battiste emphasizes the centrality of language in cultural preservation. That sense of preservation is, Battiste makes clear, not only linguistic and cultural, but also spiritual, indeed sacred. The Aboriginal sense of the sacred Battiste describes is not only otherworldly; it is enacted in ceremonies and ritual, practices perhaps resonant with Christians’ celebration of the Eucharist.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Miller 2019.

² Battiste and Youngblood Henderson 2009, 5. To collapse all European knowledge into an acronym is an act of violent reductionism. Is not the same the case with condensing Indigenous thought into an acronym?

³ Battiste and Youngblood Henderson, 2009, 6. "Opposite" is surely an oversimplification; the oral tradition (for instance) also characterizes the European tradition (Pinar 2019, 15).

⁴ Battiste and Youngblood Henderson, 2009, 6.

⁵ Battiste and Youngblood Henderson, 2009, 7. Ethics, for instance, is an ancient theme in European philosophy.

⁶ Battiste and Youngblood Henderson, 2009, 9.

⁷ Battiste and Youngblood Henderson, 2009, 10. Emphasis added.

⁸ Battiste and Youngblood Henderson, 2009, 13.

⁹ Battiste 1998, 16.

¹⁰ Battiste 1998, 18.

¹¹ Battiste 1998, 18. In European traditions, the concept of attunement implies such spiritual knowing. See Pinar 2019, 261.

¹² Battiste 1998, 20. George Grant too was horrified by the homogeneity of "modernity," the secular form Judaism and Christianity took in contemporary European and European-descent societies: Pinar 2019, 7.

¹³ Battiste 1998, 21.

¹⁴ Battiste 1998, 21.

¹⁵ Battiste 1998, 22. While perhaps the case at the time of this writing, it is not true today, at least not at the University of British Columbia where coursework in “IK” is mandatory.

¹⁶ Battiste 1998, 24. “To be noun-oriented, thing-oriented, or positivistically oriented,” Aoki (2005 [1993], 205) pointed out, “is to be culturally conditioned to see multiplicity as multiple identities.... That is, we are drawn into a view that any identity is a pre-existent presence – a presence we can represent by careful scrutiny and copy.”

¹⁷ Battiste 2013, 19. The matter of unforced assimilation is left unaddressed.

¹⁸ Battiste 2013, 25. Homogeneity is a prominent feature of modernity – as George Grant lamented - but “change” is its manta, not only technological but also political, as the cultural homogeneity threatens is contested within “Eurocentric” traditions but, as the Battiste text testifies, within Aboriginal ones as well.

¹⁹ Battiste 2013, 25. While it is obligatory for curriculum to be “accurate,” it – or the educators who teach it - cannot “ensure” learning.

²⁰ Battiste 2013, 26.

²¹ Battiste 2013, 76. Institutions may have failed but individual European and European-descent scholars have not, as cultural and political critiques of European culture – at every historical moment – are common. See, for instance, the essays and fiction of the early twentieth-century Austrian writer Robert Musil, or those of the mid-twentieth century Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, or the scholarship of the late twentieth-century U.S. educator C.A. Bowers. Efforts to reconstruct European traditions are just as common: consider the essays and social work of Jane Addams, Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, John Dewey, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas. Such sweeping and simplistic claims can only undermine Battiste’s argument.

²² Battiste 2013, 76. In the United States and not only in anti-racist scholarship, “difference” has been proclaimed as positive and politically progressive: Castenell and Pinar 1993.

²³ Battiste 2013, 79. Such unpacking is political of course, but it is also a matter of subjective reconstruction, as Fanon knew: Pinar 2015, 188.

²⁴ Battiste 2013, 89.

²⁵ Battiste 2013, 89.

²⁶ Battiste 2013, 108

²⁷ Battiste 2013, 108.

²⁸ Battiste 2013, 110.

²⁹ “Each of us is born into a concrete language of our mother tongue,” Aoki (2005 [1987/1991], 239) notes, and “any second language will always remain second,” but, he reminds, learning a second language is not only acquiring a communicative skill: “coming to know a second language is indeed a coming to now a way to enter a new world.” Those who learn a “second language do not alter their relationship to the

world,” he suggests, “but rather enrich and extend it through the world of the foreign language” (Aoki 2005 [1987/1991], 240).

³⁰ Battiste 2013, 110.

³¹ Battiste 2013, 111. She acknowledges that English could not function without verbs, and that Aboriginal languages have nouns.

³² Battiste 2013, 111.

³³ Battiste 2013, 120. One effect, she suggests is that “many often do not see the merit of holding to Aboriginal language systems, cultures, or world views, nor understand the wealth of knowledge within their own systems.” (Battiste 2013, 121).

³⁴ Battiste 2013, 120.

³⁵ Battiste 2013, 120.

³⁶ Battiste 2013, 120.

³⁷ Battiste 2013, 120.

³⁸ Battiste 2013, 125.

³⁹ Battiste 2013, 125.

⁴⁰ Battiste 2013, 126.

⁴¹ Battiste 2013, 126-127.

⁴² Battiste 2013, 132. This sense of “inclusive” reminds one of George Grant’s praise of particularity.

⁴³ Battiste 2013, 133.

⁴⁴ Battiste 2013, 133.

⁴⁵ Battiste 2013, 133-134. These are hardly “distinctive,” as each is elaborately articulated in progressive education; see, for example, Dewey 1916, Latta 2013, Trueit 2012.

⁴⁶ Battiste 2013, 133-134. Stressing the sacred is what Battiste does: “Spirit-gravitating experiences contribute to learning in significant ways. And they have a place in education and in lifelong learning. The silence on First Nations spirituality in the classroom, even in denominational schools, has left a gap in learning which reduces education to the mind and skills, and removes the factor that fuels our passion for our work, love, and meaning making” (2013, 136).

⁴⁷ Battiste 2013, 134-135. Cosmopolitanism is of course very much a European conception: see, for instance, Pinar 2009. Battiste critiques the Aboriginal self-doubt colonialism has deposited (see Battiste 2013, 134-135), but erasing all self-doubt is surely ill-advised, as it is one impetus to expanding identity.

⁴⁸ Battiste 2013, 137. “Attending to spirit,” she continues, “is always present in our learning environments, and is simply about creating an environment or space where people bring their whole selves, their stories, their voice, their culture, their symbols, and their spiritual experience to their learning.”

⁴⁹ Battiste 2013, 139.

⁵⁰ Battiste 2013, 141.