

ASSIMILATION INTO SELF-DETERMINATION, CONSTRAINT AND FRUSTRATION INTO HOPE AND POSSIBILITY

The cultural genocide associated with residential schools, Eber Hampton reminds, was not confined to those institutions, alleging that: “Most, but not all, university education in Canada today is education for assimilation.”¹ Even when First Nations subjects are the “subjects of study,” he continues, “the perspective is almost always Eurocentric,” although Hampton allows that “some professors recognize the cultural foundations of their views and acknowledge the existence of other perspectives.”² Failure to conduct education “in accordance with an Aboriginal understanding of the commitments undertaken has distorted education, transforming it from a tool of self-determination into a weapon of captivity.”³ Hampton references treaties that promised the (1) establishment of schools, (2) equal educational outcomes, and (3) choice.⁴ The “mission of an Aboriginal controlled university would centre around the articulation and dissemination of Aboriginal knowledge and advancement of the self-determined priorities of Aboriginal communities,”⁵ he explains, transforming education “from a weapon of assimilation into a tool of self-determination.”⁶

That binary seems also in play when Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache assert that “[A]boriginal education is taking place in a landscape in which hope and possibility live side by side with constraint and frustration.”⁷ They ascribe the former two to the insistence of communities, families, and educators that “Aboriginal values and knowledge is” the “best way to ensure the well-being of children and youth,” and the latter two to “an environment in which state authority and popular culture challenge Aboriginal efforts politically, ideologically, and economically.”⁸ Nothing new, as they remind that “Aboriginal education has always been practiced on a terrain of intense political negotiations,” both “at the micro level in day-today interactions in the classroom” and “at the macro level in the larger arena of school-state relations.”⁹

State relations include provincial relations, as “provincial decision-making has a powerful practical impact upon the possibilities in Aboriginal education,” expressed in “recent years” by “funding cutbacks and changes in thinking about curriculum.”¹⁰ Despite these frustrations, hopes remain high, Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache tell us, especially concerning “language revitalization,” as the curriculum’s contribution to “language fluency” – while “less than has been desired by communities” – can be powerful.¹¹ Language revitalization represents cultural renewal, and Aboriginal parents want the curriculum to “reverse the experience of cultural denial that has been lived by generations of Aboriginal people.”¹² There is hope, Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache continue, that recommendations by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) can open “new possibilities, loosening the stranglehold of entrenched

constraints, turning frustration into understanding, and transforming hope into trust.”¹³ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache characterize the RCAP recommendations as “another chapter in the long conversation that Aboriginal peoples and Canadian governments have engaged in since early contact on the subject of education.”¹⁴ The “promise of education,” they conclude, “is that it will enable Aboriginal people to sustain well-being while meeting their responsibilities in the circle of life.”¹⁵

Fulfilling that promise requires Indigenous control, evident in a study of the Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI)¹⁶, a “Métis-controlled institution established to respond specifically to the needs of Métis communities and off-reserve Aboriginal people.”¹⁷ Admitting that in 1991-1992 Aboriginal students were give preferential treatment in admission – their averages “below those of the general arts and science first-year admissions” - Dorion and Yang ascribe blame to the failure of elementary and secondary education in Saskatchewan to prepare Aboriginal students for post-secondary education.¹⁸ That these students suffer “exceptionally high” drop-out rates and that those who do “survive to graduation often have lower levels of academic achievement than do their non-Aboriginal counterparts” seems also the fault of secondary, not post-secondary, institutions.¹⁹

Concentrating on “education through cultural research,” GDI established a curriculum to support the development of curriculum and historical educational materials focused on Métis history and culture.²⁰ Almost all GDI programs are community-based; students can take courses and complete their education in their own communities, enabling them to “maintain their cultural and political awareness within a bicultural and sometimes bilingual” setting.²¹ GDI programs emphasize Native studies as it provides a comprehensive system of supports that gives students full access to individual and family counseling; many programs include an applied practicum phase.²² Indeed: Dorion and Yang characterized GDI programs as “vocationally oriented.”²³ Apparently appropriately so: high rates of population growth and the limits of employment in Métis communities have forced many Métis to search the broader Canadian labour market for employment where competition requires the “Métis to be equipped with the right education and skills to compete for jobs.”²⁴ These facts complicate Métis’ “two major goals: (1) maintaining a distinct Métis identity and culture and (2) achieving self-identification and self-government.”²⁵

COMMENTARY

As crushing as the experience of the residential schools was – a long but specific moment in the history of cultural genocide in Canada – subjective reconstruction is

possible, evident in these essays wherein education for assimilation can be converted into learning for self-determination. Likewise, these studies suggest that constraint and frustration can become hope and possibility. That authoritarian practices can paradoxically produce their contraries is a theme of an intriguing critique of progressivism made by Ramsey McGlazer.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Hampton 2000, 211.
² Hampton 2000, 211.
³ Hampton 2000, 211.
⁴ Hampton 2000, 211.
⁵ Hampton 2000, 220.
⁶ Hampton 2000, 222.
⁷ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 251.
⁸ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 251.
⁹ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 251.
¹⁰ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 252.
¹¹ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 252.
¹² Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 253.

¹³ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 253.

¹⁴ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 254.

¹⁵ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 255.

¹⁶ Formally incorporated as a non-profit corporation in 1980, the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research (GDI) is the “educational arm” of the Métis Society of Saskatchewan; as Métis-directed educational and cultural establishment, GDI is “unique” in Canada (Dorion and Yang 2000, 179-180). Visit <https://gdins.org/> accessed 2019-07-06.

¹⁷ Dorion and Yang 2000, 176.

¹⁸ Dorion and Yang 2000, 178.

¹⁹ Dorion and Yang 2000, 178.

²⁰ Dorion and Yang 2000, 180.

²¹ Dorion and Yang 2000, 180-181.

²² Dorion and Yang 2000, 180-181.

²³ Dorion and Yang 2000, 185-186.

²⁴ Dorion and Yang 2000, 176.

²⁵ Dorion and Yang 2000, 176.