

## **“WITHIN THE OUTSIDER”: CHALLENGES OF AN INDIGENOUS PEDAGOGUE**

Cyndy Baskin

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### **INTRODUCTION**

I am Cyndy Baskin, marginalized Aboriginal woman. I am Cyndy Baskin, university instructor and PhD. candidate. I am made up of multiple identities.

Until recently, I never had teachers who were not non-Native, readings that were not written by non-Native authors and fellow students who were not non-Native. I was always the only one who was “different”. Being at school was painful. I was an isolated, persecuted, sad student. And yet, I learned how to read and write in these places and this became my escape from the hurt. No matter what was done to me, it could not stifle my desire to learn. The harder schooling became for me, the more I delved into my studies. The more I heard that I would not make it to university, the more I grew determined to do exactly that. Great damage was done – some of it has been repaired while some of it never will be. It is a part of who I am. There were many downs, drop outs and changes of direction, but education is clearly my calling.

My story is, of course, a familiar one for many Aboriginal people. Education has more often than not been our enemy – a major arm of colonialism. For me, this is a lived reality. Being in the academy and becoming an educator, then, is one of my most powerful acts of resistance and anti-colonial activity.

### **HISTORY/THE PAST**

I have chosen to create a discourse in the classroom based on my historical and cultural background and that of the students who occupy that space. In an anti-colonial framework, this involves students of colonized backgrounds speaking about their experiences and understandings of their and their ancestors’ histories. Such histories include both the centering of Indigenous knowledges as powerful ways of knowing and an

examination of how colonialism devalues these knowledges. This pedagogy is not about omitting Eurocentric traditions. It is about being inclusive. All knowledges and cultures can exist within the centre and complement one another.

Why is the past so important to pedagogy? One of my favourite writers, Haunani-Kay Trask (1991), states, "We do not need, nor do we want to be 'liberated' from our past because it is the source of our understanding....The Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past, seeking historical answers for present-day dilemmas" (164). Similarly, Aboriginal writer Roy Vickers (1990), claims that "...change comes from understanding ourselves, our weaknesses and our strengths. That understanding can be fostered through knowledge of our past, our cultural heritage and our environment" (145).

All students ought to have this belief – that the answers to their current difficulties lie in the traditional knowledges of their cultures. They need to be aware that, despite the dysfunctionality caused by colonialism, we have many healthy ways of surviving and growing. We are so much more than victims. If this understanding is fostered in the classroom, students from all cultural backgrounds will not merely survive their education, they will thrive instead. They will develop confidence in their own ways of knowings and, therefore, in themselves.

However, in order to understand the knowledge of the past, one has to first know about it. This involves challenging the historical amnesia that has prevailed in education thus far. The spaces that each of us occupies today is explained by history and so emancipatory discourses need to occur in the classroom. For Aboriginal peoples in Canada, decolonization involves rewriting histories and curriculum "to (re)claim not only a past which was excluded in the history of the colonial nation (i.e. Canada), but also to name the colonial historical period from the perspective of their places and their peoples" (Dei, 2000:119). It also means teaching these perspectives in ways that clearly recognize how the past influences the present. Hence, such a pedagogy is about decolonizing the minds of all students. As Bell Hooks (1988) stresses when referring to the writing of Albert Memmi, "if domination is to end, there must be personal transformation on both sides. For those of us who oppose and

resist domination, whether we be dominated or dominators, there is the shared longing for personal transformation, for the remaking and reconstituting of ourselves" (32).

## MY SUBJECTIVITY

I feel very connected to my past and have an understanding of the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada both pre-contact and under colonialism. I have also been a part of my extended family and community my entire life. However, recently part of my social location has greatly changed and I wonder how this changes not only me but my relationships and connections. I now have a bit of power and a great deal of privilege.

The power occurs in the classroom, of course, and especially in the evaluating of students' work. The privilege comes with having the title "university professor." People in the mainstream are impressed with this title and, once they hear it, are suddenly seemingly more interested in what I have to say. They invite me to speak at conferences and submit papers to journals. At times, however, they want an Aboriginal professor present as long as I fit into their view of me. It comes down to the question of whether or not it is merely an Aboriginal body that is wanted or an Aboriginal perspective.

Then there is my family and community who truthfully could not care less that I am teaching at a university or am in a doctoral program. No one else close to me is involved in either of these ventures. No one asks much about what I am studying or teaching. Instead they ask if I will be at the pow-wow next weekend, if I can help cook for the feast at an upcoming naming ceremony and can I put out the garbage after supper.

I find myself in a strange place. How I enjoy the honour of teaching young people and how important I see this work to our collective future. Yet, I am uneasy with my new privileges and fearful that I will lose some of my connections to my community because of them. It seems I have crossed over some barrier that I have fought hard against, but in doing so I am unsure about the space I now occupy on the other side.

## RACE AND REPRESENTATION

As an Aboriginal educator, I find I am confronted regularly with issues of race and representation. I usually find that many people make assumptions about me based on what they think they know about Aboriginal people. Upon realizing that I am an Aboriginal woman, so many non-Native people are visibly surprised as they remark "You don't look Aboriginal!" What am I supposed to look like other than myself? They are further surprised to hear that I am educated: "You've done really well for a Native person!" I've done really well at what? As if this is not enough, they cannot imagine how it could be that I live, as best I can, a traditional lifestyle according to my spirituality and teachings. They exclaim, "But how can that be when you live in the city?!" Did someone make up a rule and not let me in on it?

This reminds me of the ludicrous, but true, example provided by Marcia Crosby (1991) about the British Columbia government lawyers who attempted to dispute land claims by Aboriginal people "who eat pizza, drive cars and watch television" (279). To be a "real Indian" then, one must meet Eurocentrically-established definitions.

There is also a tendency for many non-Native people to expect me to represent all Aboriginal people. I have sat in classrooms in the past where a student has asked the instructor a question and his response has been "Well, we have a Native girl in our class, so let's ask her." I have sat in boardrooms where, when the discussion turns to Aboriginal peoples, all eyes look to me for approval. I have been approached by endless committees to be the Aboriginal representative at their tables. It is as though who I am is whatever others want me to be at the time.

Ella Shohat (1995) refers to this as the "burden of representation." It is the construction that marks me as the Aboriginal student, Aboriginal social worker, Aboriginal writer, etc. It is highly unlikely that I will ever be seen as a student, social worker or writer. As Crosby (1991) asserts, Indigenous peoples "...are inscribed to stand as the West's opposite" (268). Aboriginal, in this way, is seen as opposite of student, social worker and writer.

Being one of the representatives of Aboriginal peoples' voices is a formidable responsibility. I always begin my presentations with "I'm not here to speak for all Aboriginal peoples." Yet some of us are directed to pick this responsibility up and, at least, I know that I will do it in an honourable way. Fulfilling these responsibilities "our way" is a major act of resistance.

This brings me to Shohat's (1995) question "does the experience of oppression confer special jurisdiction over the right to speak about oppression?" (167). That depends on what exactly one is speaking about. No one but an Aboriginal person can speak about what it is to experience oppression towards Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal peoples using their voices to reveal the history of colonization and its repercussions is another act of resistance for us. As Hooks (1992) writes, "It is a gesture of resistance to the dominant culture's way of thinking about history, identity, and community for us to decolonize our minds, reclaim the word that is our history as it was told to us by our ancestors, not as it has been interpreted by the colonizer" (184). However, other voices can address other perspectives on oppression. We all have a responsibility to address oppression whether or not we have experienced it ourselves. Furthermore, those of us from so-called "minority groups" do not want to silence potential allies.

The notion of difference also needs to be considered. In many areas, however, difference is simply ignored. Yet, all too often, the remedy to this is to address differences simply as *cultural* differences. As valued as cultural practices are, there is a danger in the simplification of addressing difference through cross-cultural strategies and multiculturalism. As Sherene Razack (1998) emphasizes, such approaches "...do little to ensure that white teachers will view their Asian and Black pupils as capable of the same level of achievement and range of desires as their white students" and, furthermore, "if white teachers can learn the appropriate cultural rules, we need not hire Black teachers, and we need not address racism" (9).

But what happens when some of us become black teachers and Aboriginal lawyers? Both Fanon (1970) and Bhabha (1989) speak to the colonizer's invitation to accept the identity of "you're a doctor, a writer, a student, you're different, you're one of us" (139). Now there is an ambivalent, dual identity for we are both not like them and like them. Forever we are referred to

as the black doctor, the Latino judge, the lesbian professor and the blind writer. They use us as evidence that there are no current oppressions. They praise us by saying "see, you made it and you're Aboriginal!" To remain one of them is precarious, however. As Fanon (1970) writes, "I knew, for instance, that if the physician made a mistake it would be the end of him, and of all those who came after him" ( 225).

## IDENTITY POLITICS

As the only Aboriginal instructor in the university where I teach, I find myself as the "outsider within"." Both faculty and students have preconceived notions about the opinions I hold and the "expertise" I carry. I have been expected to teach certain courses such as "An Introduction to First Nations Issues" and "Anti-Oppression and Human Diversity." For me, this is not so much the issue as then being questioned and criticized for my pedagogy in these courses. This is added, of course, on top of the emotional cost that comes with an Aboriginal instructor teaching about colonialism, racism and other oppressions to mostly white students. According to Channer and Franklin (1995), as quoted in Housee, "For lecturers there is increased stress associated with managing full and frank discussions...initially the study of 'race' and racism triggers in many white students feelings of guilt and/or denial and resentment..." (13). This often involves students projecting their anger onto the messenger – me.

My identity is also influenced by students' perceptions of the significance of shared affinities. At times, Aboriginal and other minority students have unrealistic expectations of me based on such affinities. They state, for instance, "You must understand, after all, you're one of us." Some take advantage of me by missing classes or handing in shoddy work and then saying, "I didn't think you'd give me a bad grade. I thought you knew where I was coming from". Other times, they make assumptions about the bit of power I have, thinking that I can influence the university administration to make changes in their favour.

In addition, my pedagogical approach extends beyond the regular instructor duties. Well aware of the difficulties that Aboriginal and other minority students face in the academy, I

willingly extend myself to assist them to stay in school. Hooks (1989), Hill (1991) and Housee (2001) all argue that "...shared race and gender affinities can lead to giving unconventional support to students. This is a mentoring role that surpasses normal teaching responsibilities and has been referred to as community othermothering" (84). This "othermothering" goes beyond academic assistance to help students with their struggles both within and outside the university from housing to childcare to internalized oppression.

Community identity is too important to me not to continue it within the academy. This is another side to identity politics, collective action and the oppositional movement. My mentoring of certain students is part of my responsibility in exchange for the privileges I now have.

## **ESSENTIALISM/AUTHENTICITY**

Can there be identity without essentialism? I believe one can have one's identity without essentializing. I also do not see essentialism as totally negative. What is the big deal about a little essentializing, anyway? I am more than a little fed up with the critique of Aboriginal scholars as essentialist, claiming an authentic voice and romanticizing the past.

I have no problem with questioning or challenging a claim to authenticity. However, I agree with Linda Smith (1999), who notes that the questions around who is a real Aboriginal person or what are the real cultural values has become a political debate which is "designed to fragment and marginalize those who speak for, or in support of, indigenous issues. They frequently have the effect also of silencing and making invisible the presence of other groups within the indigenous society like women, the urban non-status tribal person and those whose ancestry or 'blood quantum' is 'too white'" (72). This is the same old strategy of divide and conquer that has been used since the beginning of colonialism disguised as a new theory. In fact, decolonizing our minds involves reclaiming our cultural values in the process of liberation.

In my opinion, it becomes more important to ask who is doing the questioning about authentic voices. For Aboriginal peoples, culture and identity are crucial elements of anti-colonial

approaches and acts of resistance. But there is backlash whenever we resist. According to Andrew Lattas (1993), certain intellectuals criticize “Aborigines when they construct their identity out of images of inheritance – be they the inheritance of blood and body or even of a cultural past. There is something disturbing about the self-confidence of some white academics who have assumed the role of offering critical advice to Aborigines about what sort of identity they should be producing” (244).

I find all of this terribly ironic given that this essentialist criticism goes on at the same time as Aboriginal studies courses are brought into the academy only as electives and taught by “specialized” staff. These courses are never intended to challenge the central bodies of knowledge since they are kept structurally apart from mainstream disciplines. In addition, non-Native academics often refer students and others to the Aboriginal studies instructor for readings, guidance and resources rather than re-educate themselves on the issues. Then, of course, those Aboriginal people teaching in the academy are often recruited with “Aboriginality” as a qualification. This can be used against them to imply that it is the only reason they got the job which undermines their professional status and denies them a significant voice. Thus, it is often presumed that they have competence only in Aboriginal issues and other opportunities are closed off from them.

I see a positive side to essentialism and authenticity. There can be an empowering role of essentialism in both identity politics and resistance movements (Lattas, 1993). This involves acknowledging the past as a living part of the present and validating the significance of biological inheritance and blood memory. Authenticity is a commitment to one’s true self and “this need to produce a tradition for one’s people apart from the culture of the assimilation policy is a desire to bring the culture of one’s dead ancestors back to life by giving the past new meaning and by recreating this past as a way of formulating an uncolonised space to inhabit” (Lattas, 1993, 254).

The past is, as well, connected to experience. We can acknowledge how the social facts of race, class, gender, etc. function in peoples’ lives without reducing them to those social determinants. Yet, as Paula Moya (1997) writes, “Oppressed groups may have epistemic privilege.” She continues:



The simple fact of having been born a person of color in the United States, of having suffered the effects of heterosexism or of economic deprivation does not, in and of itself, give someone a better understanding or knowledge of the structure of our society. The key to claiming epistemic privilege for people who have been oppressed in a particular way stems from an acknowledgement that they have experiences – experiences that people who are not oppressed in that same way usually lack – that *can* provide them with information we all need to understand how hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality operate to uphold existing regimes of power in our society. Thus, what is being claimed is not any *a priori* link between social location or identity and knowledge, but a link that is historically variable and mediated through the interpretation of experience (136).

In this sense, life experiences can inform classroom discussions. This is a useful form of pedagogy, particularly for those Aboriginal and other minority students who expect the text-based knowledge to be presented as universal and privileged. This kind of pedagogy can be viewed as strategic essentialism. Hooks (1994), for instance, defends using the positive possibilities of essentialism in the classroom when she writes that “the assertion of a strategic essentialism on the part of students from marginalized groups can be a strategic response to domination and to colonization, a survival strategy that may rescue...those students from negation” (83). Thus, marginalized students, as well as instructors, can use their subjective experience as part of the anti-colonial resistance struggle.

## RESISTANCE

My resistance in the academy focuses on my pedagogy – what I teach and how I teach. My resistance in the academy is oppositional pedagogy. Like Metis scholar and activist, Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) claims, “I acknowledge my intention to oppose in the education system whatever I perceive is operating to oppress, repress or disenfranchise me and the members of

other cultural communities" (11). In addition to critically analyzing the Eurocentric foundations of Western educational models and knowledges, I am also interested in challenging Westerners about what they say about the history and cultures of Indigenous peoples. I also aim to move beyond critique to an exploration of the legitimacy of Aboriginal, holistic paradigms within educational frameworks. Thus, for example, in the classrooms where I teach it is the Aboriginal circle and an embodied approach that are my primary pedagogical tools. After all, the experience of being a minority instructor who is teaching from an anti-oppressive stance based on Indigenous perspectives in a white, Western context is an embodied experience. What I have to teach are experiences living in my body and I have been taught by my Traditional Teachers and Elders that it is my responsibility to share my personal journey. As Graveline (1998) emphasizes, "As Aboriginal educators, we need to know – acknowledge and communicate – our own past pains, our present struggles and our visions for the future in order to assist others on their own paths" (217). As an Aboriginal instructor, then, I learn and teach through my own experience/voice. However, I must be always mindful that I keep this personal political.

For me, resistance in the academy is also about role modeling. As Hooks (1989) writes, "Black students look to black professors for an example of ways to be whole, of ways to exist in this social context that allow celebration and acceptance of difference, ways to integrate rather than adapt, ways to be subject rather than object" (68). Aboriginal and other minority students need to be assured that they belong in higher education, that they can succeed in their studies and that success does not equal racial isolation. This sometimes entails that I, as an instructor, purposely ensure that spaces are opened up for minority students to safely express themselves. Part of the backlash that comes with this is that some white students complain that I favour or give more attention to minority students. When the issue arises, it is discussed. My stand on this is that the spaces must be created to encourage all students to speak. There are few clearer ways to express disrespect for and to disempower students than by not listening. This conveys that both the message and its speaker are of no value and, in so doing, we eliminate her/him from our view. This has happened far too long to Aboriginal and other minority students. It will not happen in my classroom.

## CONCLUSION

I picture myself as a circle. The circle is made up of many parts, but all of them are connected. I am an Aboriginal woman, a university instructor, a mother, a PhD. candidate, partner, sister, activist, writer, granddaughter, community member....I know who I am. I am all of these and more. I locate myself firmly within a decolonization framework. I accept and take up all of the struggles, confusions and challenges that accompany such a space. As long as I continue there, I will not be burdened by representation. I will, however, be responsible.

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**NISHNAABE KINOOMAADWIN NAAMAADWIN**