

Book review of Marie Battiste (Ed.) (2016). *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy*. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press.

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Abstract: This text comprises a book review of Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy edited by Marie Battiste. The book covers a wide variety of topics including Indigenizing social studies and math education, representations of Mi'kmaw in the Nova Scotia curriculum, Mi'kmaw language resurgence and revitalization efforts, and Mi'kmaw approaches to research and theory in the humanities. This essay highlights three distinct contributions of Mi'kmaw Humanities. First, the book helps frame the conversation around responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) calls to action in the Mi'kmaw philosophy of humanity. Second, it provides practitioners working with Indigenous peoples valuable insight into navigating cultural, epistemic, and linguistic differences. Finally, Mi'kmaw Humanities gives the next generation of Mi'kmaw scholars a firm base from which to assert their intellectual independence.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Indigenous research, Mi'kmaw Humanities, Indigenization

Introduction

Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy comes to us at a critical moment in the history of Indigenous research. Previous generations of Indigenous scholars have been subversive through the very fact of their existence and have had to fight for their right to be in the university, as well as for the validity of working within their own Indigenous knowledge systems. The current movement toward academic “Indigenization,” or the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges, people, and languages in academic spaces, has yielded rich literature upon which current and future generations of Indigenous researchers can build. Mi'kmaw scholar and Elder Marie Battiste's (2016) edited collection is a localized and practical contribution to that literature and will doubtlessly serve as a base for the next seven generations of Mi'kmaw scholars.

Contents

The stage for the conversation around Indigenizing the academy is respectfully set by Elder Stephen Augustine through his recounting of the Mi'kmaw creation story. This teaching serves as a reminder that we are all born of earth and sky and that nothing can be divorced from the spiritual; our existence is inherently holistic, as was our creation. Later in the collection, Henderson's chapter, *L'nu¹ Humanities*, goes deeply into the connection between Elder Augustine's telling of the Creation Story and Lnu'uk civilization toward a fuller understanding of the shape and structure of Mi'kmaw humanity. For Henderson, “this concept of humanity is based on trying to maintain harmony with the implicate order of an ecology, which was viewed as divine and sovereign, rather than attempts to overcome or humanize, anthropomorphize or zoologicalize the ecology” (p. 47). Augustine and Henderson's foundational lenses provide a thoughtful grounding for the remaining chapters.

Margaret Robinson's contribution, *Mi'kmaw Stories in Research*, showcases the process through which the author examined traditional Mi'kmaw stories for themes related to veganism. Through description of the employed research process, the author provides an example of an approach to the humanities, and in particular textual hermeneutics, which dances along the edge of Indigenous and settler thought—in Robinson's words, a form of Albert and Murdena Marshall's two-eyed seeing (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012), or a way of simultaneously seeing the world through both Indigenous and settler lenses.

In *Smug Settler to Ethical Ally*, Len Findlay articulates his own journey of decolonizing his settler perspective. Drawing on Elder Augustine's telling of the Creation Story, Findlay discusses the ways in which he has been changed through taking seriously the teachings of Mi'kmaw people, which he juxtaposes with the uncritical work of early colonial scholars. Findlay's journey is an important read for settlers hoping to become conceptual and ethical allies.

¹ L'nu is the Mi'kmaw word for ourselves. L'nu is the plural (Mi'kmaq). Lnu'uk is the singular form (Mi'kmaw). Here, I attempt to stay consistent with the individual author's usage.

Taking a conversational tone in *Teaching from the Basket*, Marjorie Gould and Marie Battiste discuss family history and lessons gained from the everyday through the story of the expert basket-maker Caroline Gloud. Drawing on their experiences, Gloud and Battiste “realize[d] that the basket is about the actualization of our deeply embodied knowledge as part of our daily lives, as story and art and history and language and values and teachings” (p. 105). Continuing discussions of basket making, Isobel Findlay’s section, *Weaving the Interdisciplinary Basket*, traces the author’s own interdisciplinary journey, then moves into a discussion of the intersections between Indigenous knowledges, the social sciences, and the humanities toward a reasserting of narratives of Indigenous economic ingenuity and sustainability.

Marie Battiste’s chapter, *Mi’kmaw Symbolic Literacy*, takes us back to the author’s doctoral work on Mi’kmaw literacy. In the present chapter, Battiste builds a strong case for a rigorous pre-contact Mi’kmaw knowledge system based on reading, interpreting, and talking through symbols.

In *Learning Shame*, the first of two chapters by Nancy Peters, the author lays out several of the dispositions and conditionings common in settler thought that create barriers to reconciliation and the Indigenization of the academy. Peters is particularly adamant that settlers need to truly listen to the stories Indigenous people tell about themselves and that feeling collective shame is a starting point for authentic engagement and change. Peters’ second contribution, *Tales Told in Schools*, represents a considerable and rigorous discourse analysis of the images of Mi’kmaw people in Nova Scotia curriculum and provincially approved textbooks. However, the author’s treatment of Mi’kmaw history contains several subtle instances of unchallenged colonial historical narratives,² which are positioned as markers of a ubiquitous derogatory discourse toward Mi’kmaw people in the Nova Scotian curriculum. The irony of putting forward non-contextualized iterations of colonial history in a text designed to analyze their existence in another setting should not, however, take away from the value of the contribution. The chapter represents an important account of the historic and present ways in which the Mi’kmaw have been vilified and erased through the public school curriculum. Peters ends the chapter by recommending alternative works that could be implemented by the provincial schooling authority.

Decolonizing Social Studies Education focuses on research conducted by Jennifer Tinkham about student perceptions of schooling in on-reserve and off-reserve schools. The results of the author’s research clearly show that on-reserve schools create a more integrated learning experience for Mi’kmaw students. This is not, however, because of any difference in curriculum but rather in the ability of the on-reserve teachers to help students make connections between Eurocentric bodies of knowledge and their lived realities as Mi’kmaw people. Additionally, the author makes several suggestions about how non-Indigenous teachers can help Indigenous students build bridges between their worldviews and curriculum outcomes, but also emphasizes the need for change in curriculum.

In *Transforming Mathematics Education*, Lisa Lunney Borden describes her own experience of learning Mi’kmaw culture and language as a teacher in a community school. Borden also discusses the ways in which the Mi’kmaw language expresses mathematical concepts differently than European languages. Drawing from professional experience as well as doctoral research, Borden describes some of the ways mathematics can be made more relevant and understandable to Mi’kmaw students. Of particular interest is the “show me your math” project, in which Mi’kmaw students were encouraged to speak with Elders in the community to understand the ways numbers were used in traditional Mi’kmaw society.

In *Mi’kmaw Humanity*, Nova Scotia Treaty Education Lead Jamie Battiste challenges the legitimacy of the *Indian Act* and the arbitrary and oppressive regulations it establishes around band membership. Battiste articulates the need for autonomy in determining band membership. For Battiste, Indigenous peoples—and no one else—ought to have the right to determine who is and is not an Indigenous person. Central to concerns of Indigenous identity are discussions about the resurgence and protection of our traditional languages. Here, Ashley Julian’s *Thinking Seven Generations Ahead* summarizes their master’s thesis around the Mi’kmaw language, language learning, and language revitalization. Julian is particularly emphatic that Indigenous pedagogy is rooted in the land and that efforts toward the revitalization the Mi’kmaw language be rooted in land-based pedagogies.

² One example of this is the reiteration of the Mi’kmaw mercenary myth (pp. 181-182), that the Mi’kmaq were hired by the French to kill the Beothuk in *Ktaqmkuk* (Newfoundland), which is presented as an “assertion” but without acknowledgement of the literature that has proven this myth to be a colonial falsehood used by post-confederation governments to undermine the Mi’kmaw claim to sovereignty in *Ktaqmkuk* (Wetzel, 1995).

In their conclusion to the volume, Marie Battiste, Lynne Bell, Isobel Findlay, Len Findlay, and Sa'ke'j Hendersen come together to offer a collective reflection on Mi'kmaw humanities. Here, they focus on the healing potential of re-writing colonial histories, curricular narratives, and stories about the Mi'kmaw.

Discussion

The varying scope of the contributions in *Visioning Mi'kmaw Humanities* make it a valuable resource for scholars and educators working in many different fields, including education, native studies, sociology, political science, and the humanities more broadly. Practitioners working in Indigenous communities across the country may find useful insight in the later chapters dealing with subject-specific Indigenization. Additionally, academics working toward institutional reconciliation and Indigenization will find the chapters by Isobel Findlay and Len Findlay as well as Nancy Peter's contributions valuable in their own decolonization—a step that has been too often forgotten in the institutional race to respond to the TRC's calls to action.

Corresponding with the rising efforts to Indigenize the academy, in recent years there has been a glut of graduate student research claiming to work within Indigenous research paradigms. While some of this research is of immediate, practical, and profound use to the communities which participate in it, many more of these projects (often conducted by well-intentioned settlers) lurk in the muddy ethical waters between working *on* and working *with* Indigenous peoples—not to mention the inattention to damage centered narratives (Tuck, 2009), the perpetuation of colonial myths, and superficial commitments to relationality. While the whole text of *Visioning Mi'kmaw Humanities* should serve as a wakeup call to the research community on Turtle Island, Margaret Robinson and Ashley Julian's work, which provide examples of rigorous Indigenous research in the humanities and social sciences respectively, will be particularly useful for students conducting research with and for Mi'kmaw people.

Finally, for myself and many other young Mi'kmaw scholars, the value of this text is in the work by Marie Battiste, Elder Stephen Augustine, and Sa'ke'j Youngblood Henderson. The depth of thinking in these contributions forms a distinct Mi'kmaw theoretical base emergent from oral history, traditional knowledge, and the unique landscape of Mi'kma'ki. In the serious discussion of story and symbols toward a deepening understanding of Mi'kmaw concepts of humanity, there emerges a potential for work that makes no apologies about its rootedness in Mi'kmaw knowledge systems. In other words, the beautiful, infinite potential of this work as a whole, specifically those texts by our Elders, is that it provides a scholarly base for work by, for, and of Mi'kmaw people, with no pretense toward being understood, accepted, or valued by settlers.

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