Part III

Religious and spiritual traditions
6

The constructed ‘Indian’ and Indigenous sovereignty

Social work practice with Indigenous peoples

Arielle Dylan and Bartholemew Smallboy

Introduction

It is impossible to write a chapter on Aboriginal spirituality, for there is no pan-Aboriginal spirituality. Many First Nations authors, who recognise commonalities among the perspectives of various Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and Native American communities in the United States, have written of Aboriginal spirituality in the context of wellness and healing (e.g. McCabe 2008; Mawhiney and Nabigon 2011; Verniest 2006), being careful to articulate the diversity of spiritual understandings and practices across Aboriginal communities. Any discussion of Aboriginal spirituality that neglects to mention the distinctive expression of spirituality across Indigenous communities (e.g. Abbott 1989; Christ 1990; Ruether 2001), however well intended, is problematic. In the same way that Christie (in press) argues that it is necessary to know the particulars of a First Nation community to begin to understand its economic needs and how such a community might best negotiate an agreement with an industrial proponent, it is necessary to be well acquainted with the specificities of a First Nation in order to understand the spirituality of its people. Representations of pan-Aboriginal spirituality, even in their broadest, most generous articulation, run the risk of reinscribing the stereotype of the ‘spiritual Indian’. This stereotype, of course, is an illusory, essentialised construct, which constrains possibilities for Indigenous expression, lived experiences and Indigenous-non-Indigenous understandings by engendering a discursive terrain that is too tightly scripted (Appiah 1994: 163). This chapter seeks to debunk and deconstruct the ‘spiritual Indian’, while also problematising the notion of pan-Aboriginality more generally, with the purpose of making the case for specificities, the need to attend to particularities and context not only when discussing but also when, in a helping role, engaging with Indigenous peoples and their communities.

This chapter will begin with an investigation of early constructions, from pre-confederate Canadian history, of the otherised Indian and then interrogate more recent surfacing of romantic Indian reifications occurring in the latter part of the twentieth century and persisting today. Having looked at these discursive formations and the way that they operate to limit and oppress, an examination of some historic social work practices with Indigenous peoples will be explored for the purpose of underscoring the professional failures that resulted from unexamined participation in colonisation and its attendant dyad, racism and cultural superiority. These areas will be
examined with the express purpose of making an iterative case for the imperative of attending to context and particularities when considering Indigenous spirituality. In this manner this chapter, which is written from a critical Indigenous perspective, will serve as a respectful departure from earlier writings regarding Aboriginal spirituality in which various models are suggested for use.

**First Nations refracted through Jesuit eyes**

Social work scholars Baskin (2011), Blackstock (2007, 2009, 2011) and Sinclair (2004), among others, have written of the vexed relationship between First Peoples of Canada and the settler-colonialists, and the role of social work both in the colonial past and present, and in the context of the contemporary decolonisation project. Examples of the troubled Indigenous-settler-colonial relationship are found in Indigenous-French culture contact in the early seventeenth century in regions that are now the Atlantic Provinces, Quebec and Ontario, as captured in the *Jesuit Relations* (Thwaites 1898). The *Relations* are the journals kept by French missionaries to document their activities in ‘New France’. These journals were sent annually to France, the colonial metropole, as a record of religious, social, cultural and linguistic – and political and economic – progress of the missionaries. In these documents the Jesuits constructed an Indian/‘savage’ who is ‘innocent’, ‘childish’, ‘like beasts’ and in need of Christian instruction to become fully human. Throughout the *Jesuit Relations*, the Jesuits promoted an understanding of First Nations that pivots on hierarchical dualisms, situating the Jesuits (and often French culture more broadly) as superior to First Nations. In this process, moments of cultural humility and respect demonstrated by Indigenous peoples toward the French are mistakenly (or deliberately) construed as inferiority, as illustrated by the following example of proselytising efforts among the Wendat:

> They are very diligent and attentive to the instructions we give them; I do not know whether it is through complaisance, for they have a great deal of this naturally, or through an instinct from above, that they listen to us so willingly concerning the mysteries of our Faith, and repeat after us, whether they understand it or not, all that we declare to them. They very willingly make the sign of the Cross, as they see us make it, raising their hands and eyes to Heaven and pronouncing the words, “Jesus, Mary”, as we do,—so far that, having observed the honor we render to the Cross, these poor people paint it on their faces, chests, arms, and legs, without being asked to do so.

(Thwaites 1898 vol. 10: 163)

The Jesuits interpreted this behavior as a Wendat disposition to comply or an instinctual response to Christian teachings. What has occurred in this interpretative process is a reduction of the Wendat to malleability and instinct, features often attributed to animals and women, who are to be ruled and contained according to Western patriarchal and anthropocentric values. Absent are the recognition of Wendat exquisite cultural and religious diplomacy, and the steps of reasoning undoubtedly employed to arrive at the collective Wendat handling of the Christian cross.

In an earlier *Relation*, the Jesuits reported ‘on the belief, superstitions, and errors of the Montagnais savages’ and, in so doing, reveal again not only a belief in their own cultural superiority but also a conviction that Indigenous peoples needed French intervention.

I believe that souls are all made from the same stock, and that they do not materially differ; hence, these barbarians having well formed bodies, and organs well regulated and well
'Indian' and Indigenous sovereignty

arranged, their minds ought to work with ease. Education and instruction alone are lacking. Their soul is a soil which is naturally good, but loaded down with all the evils that a land abandoned since the birth of the world can produce.

(Thwaites 1898 vol. 6: 229)

Here it is apparent that the construction of the ‘barbarian’ not only situates Indigenous peoples as inferior to the French and other so-called civilised peoples, but also eradicates the unique characteristics of distinct groups. The words ‘savage’ and ‘barbarians’ are used throughout the Jesuit Relations to define First Nations peoples, and the understanding for the inexperienced reader in France, as largely culturally homogeneous. This excerpt also reinforces the idea that Indigenous peoples needed to be Gallicised and Christianised to become fully human. Such a view served French imperialist and colonial aims, as possession of territory required observance of the 1095 papal bull, Terra Nullius, an international law allowing Western European Christian nations to appropriate lands deemed uninhabited. As Wolfe (2006: 388) cogently argues, ‘access to territory’ is the raison d’être of colonial practices, and toward this end ‘[s]ettler colonialism is inherently eliminatory but not invariably genocidal’ (Wolfe 2006: 387). A final trope to be identified in this passage is that of Indigenous backwardness, the idea that, in this case, French society was considerably more advanced than Indigenous societies. Sadly, this false understanding persists today, in the belief that Western Europeans brought technological progress to Indigenous peoples and, in this misguided assumption, appreciation of Indigenous technologies is missed. Zemon-Davis (1996: 30) has provided a wonderful corrective to disabuse people of this notion: she puts forward the idea of ‘absolute simultaneity’ and ‘radical contemporaneity’ in which Indigenous and colonising societies are understood as sharing the same timeline, even if using different methods to achieve sometimes similar, sometimes different goals.

The ‘ecological’ and ‘spiritual Indian’

Having looked briefly at the folly of negative stereotyping of Indigenous peoples in early Canadian history, this chapter will now turn to putative positive stereotyping or romantic ideals developed surrounding Indigenous peoples of this continent. In particular, the constructs of the ‘ecological’ and ‘spiritual’ Indian will be explored. The ideas of the ecological and spiritual Indian are inescapably intertwined in the non-Indigenous imaginary as Indigenous peoples are often misunderstood as being pagan (Riverwind 2006), so these misconceptions will be discussed here together. The precursor to the notion of the ‘ecological Indian’ developed in the pre-industrial era in Europe in response to dissatisfaction with the restrictions of Western society.

The Western imagination was ignited by thoughts of primitivism and galvanised by misconceptions gained through false representations of peoples in the ‘New World’ (Berkhofer 1976). This prompted a reworking of the utopian ideal and, in the process, posited a reified ‘noble savage’ as its hero, casting the excessively urbane, disconnected city dweller as the antihero, lacking in courage, liberty and vigour. Over the centuries, the ‘noble savage’ trope came to embody, for disenchanted Western Europeans, a resistance to all the perceived shortcomings of Western civilisation: disconnection from the natural world, primacy on reason over feeling, conformity instead of liberty and premeditation at the expense of spontaneity (Berkhofer 1976). Of note, the term ‘noble savage’ and all its romantic trappings are unrelated to Indigenous peoples and exists almost entirely in the minds, unhappy experiences and relentless strivings of non-Indigenous peoples. A further irony is that the romantic stereotype of the noble savage that holds such promise for dissatisfied white people has its roots in the violence of dispossession of
Arielle Dylan and Bartholemew Smallboy

Indigenous peoples, the ‘strategic deployment of violent sovereign power’ that inevitably marks the colonial enterprise (Coulthard 2014: 36).

In keeping with the burgeoning environmental movement of the 1960s, the ‘noble savage’ construct conveniently transmogrified into the ‘ecological Indian’ to be used on billboards and in other forms of media to advance environmental aims (Krech 1999; Strickland 1997). Harding’s (2005) content analysis investigating media portrayals of Aboriginal peoples in three Canadian newspapers, over three-quarters of a decade, found the ‘noble environmentalist’ to be among the stereotypes prominently recurring in the analysis. Not unlike the idealised and stereotypical association of Indigenous peoples with the environment, the New Age movement, which gained momentum in the 1980s, began to promulgate the idea of the ‘spiritual Indian’ by appropriating and profiting from Native American spiritual traditions (Aldred 2000; King 2012).

These romantic representations of Indigenous peoples serve the interests of non-Indigenous peoples, spiritually, sometimes economically as false medicine people charge exorbitant fees for retreats (King 2012), and anthropologically through a kind of cultural voyeurism. As a consequence of this social, cultural, discursive climate, individuals who have never met an Indigenous person will often ascribe to Indigenous peoples generally the characteristics of spirituality and ecological responsibility. Such ascription is not wrong for these are certainly fundamental dimensions of Indigenous ontology, axiology and praxis (McGregor 2009; Tallbear 2000).

However, the issues with this are several. First, the dominant culture is defining who and what an Indigenous person is and can be, and this is done in the interest of non-Indigenous, mostly white, objectives and gains. Second, when the dominant culture controls how Indigenous peoples are constructed, bizarre things happen. For example, Indigenous peoples typically become either one stereotype (lazy, drunken, social-problem riddled, etc., see for example, Proulx 2011) or another (that being discussed here), both being equally damning: damning because they do not reflect reality, damning because they do not include Indigenous authoring and circulation of their own representations, and damning because they do nothing to further the reconciliation project underway in this country and the sovereigntist aims of First Nations. In this way, the dominant culture through these purportedly positive ideals perversely ‘allows’ Indigenous peoples to be ‘spiritual’ and ‘ecological’ but does not create space for other understandings of Indigenous people to emerge or circulate. For example, in the dominant culture, discursive formations associated with Indigenous peoples do not typically include the words ‘reason’, ‘intellect’, ‘political acumen’, ‘logic’ and so on.

What has this line of investigation to do with Aboriginal spirituality? All these erroneous constructs of the Indigenous other limit possibilities for Indigenous peoples in very real ways, with respect to everyday practices, aspirational endeavours and future possibilities. Indeed, what can be described as nothing less than sanctioned quotidian violence perpetuates colonialism in the form of ‘structured dispossession’ (Coulthard 2014: 16), perhaps not of property in this iteration but dispossession nonetheless in the social, cultural and discursive terrain.

Discursive formations that include mostly caricatures of Indigenous peoples, usually negative, occasionally positive, create epistemic ignorance where there is a conviction of knowing but knowledge is absent. A social work course in group work in which a non-First Nation person drums and sings as a guest in the course, speaking of First Nation spirituality, but not mentioning Indigenous sovereignty, the Idle No More movement or the Indigenous intellectual tradition – all areas one would expect to be discussed in an academic discipline built around social justice and social transformation – is one example of this epistemic ignorance. An overwhelming number of applicants to a social work programme writing long tracts in their admission essays about their desire to help ‘Canada’s Aboriginals’ (as if the state possesses First Nations peoples), to rescue them from poverty and a litany of social afflictions, is another. It is in response to these
Indian' and Indigenous sovereignty

Pernicious understandings that we have sought in this chapter to resist any broadly articulated notion of Indigenous spirituality and have instead argued for the particular, for specificities, for it is only through understanding on this level that space is created for a real relationship to occur, and help, professional social work help or otherwise, can only occur in a relationship.

Social work and First Nations

Jennissen and Lundy (2006: 1) assert that the historical arc of social work in Canada suggests social workers have an ‘unremitting commitment … to the dual roles of alleviating human suffering of the individual and promoting broader social, political, and economic change through social action’. While this is undoubtedly an accurate historical depiction of social work development and practice among certain sectors of the Canadian population, sadly this does not obtain in the context of social work among First Nations peoples. In fact, Indian welfare policy in Canada in both its initial religio-political and later secular-economic incarnations has been oppressive, marginalising and assimilationist, and social workers, despite various professional articulations of social justice objectives, have been agents in these culturally genocidal practices (Blackstock 2009; Miller 2003; Shewell 2004). Heron’s (2007) observations about the raced, classed and gendered ways that self is constituted in helping relationships and the implicit need of a disadvantaged other in the construction of the ‘white helper’ is instructive here. A social welfare system that emerged in a colonialist state and has not sufficiently reformed or radicalised, as is the case in Canada, inevitably serves the colonialist aims of the system from which it derives (Hart 2002; Mullaly 2007). In Canada, where the ‘logic of elimination’ that marks settler-colonialism (Wolfe 2006) is inarguably writ large, the appalling record of child welfare with Aboriginal peoples is unsurprising.

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in state care and the overwhelming evidence that this phenomenon results from a racist child welfare policy rather than true neglect or abuse, leads Blackstock (2007: 71) to question, with no intended irony, whether the institution of the residential school has ‘just morph[ed] into child welfare’. This is a tremendously unsettling point that must be conceded: non-Indigenous helpers, trained social workers, have been enacting state-sanctioned harm, in the guise of child welfare, in Aboriginal communities throughout this country for decades, performing a form of cultural violence that runs roughshod over the unique Indigenous legal orders inherent to each Indigenous community in this country, legal traditions that would have mechanisms for addressing child neglect situations (Friedland and Napoleon 2015). These culturally constituted responses would not involve removing children from the community, but instead would see the situation in its broader context both in its origination and in its handling, often involving an ethic of community care (Blackstock 2009).

Child welfare is but one example of the way social work has participated in the cultural dislocation and assimilationist performances enacted by the Canadian state in a contemporary context. In a significant ruling by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, in response to the claim filed against the Federal government by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations, the Canadian government was found to racially discriminate against First Nations through service management and a funding model that ‘resulted in denials of services and created various adverse impacts for many First Nations children and families living on reserves’ (Canadian Human Rights Tribunal 2016: 161). It is hoped that the Federal government will not appeal this ruling and will instead begin implementing measures to redress this wrong.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, in his victory speech, evoked Wilfrid Laurier when uttering the phrase ‘sunny ways’, signaling how politics can be embraced as a force for positive social
change. His father, former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, had before him imagined a ‘just society’, but this vision was trenchantly critiqued by Cardinal (1969) in his seminal work The Unjust Society in which the reach of racist Aboriginal policy is detailed, and a call for profound and extensive policy change was made. Almost half a century later, Cardinal’s vision is still unfulfilled. However, this is an era of reconciliation, and there are many opportunities for Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous allies to work toward a truly just society, and this is not something that can be achieved unilaterally. As Said (1993: 7) has argued, ‘none of us is outside or beyond geography’ and there is a need in colonial and postcolonial contexts to operate with an understanding of ‘overlapping territories and intertwined histories’ in order best to understand a sociopolitical reality and effect positive change.

In Indigenous scholarship and theorising developed and adopted by helping professionals, there have been a number of approaches put forward as a means to help remedy a host of social, economic, political and rights-based inequities stemming from colonialism. Two-eyed seeing, as articulated by Bartlett et al. (2012), is an important (if limited for its emphasis on just two cultural ways of seeing) approach to bridging the cultural divide and resisting the foregrounding of mainstream knowledge through an integrative, transdisciplinary, transcultural method. Recently in a social work class with one of the authors, an Indigenous student identified the limits of two-eyed seeing and articulated her preference for the idea of multiple-eyed seeing because of its greater inclusivity. Others have written of holistic Indigenous models for healing and balanced relationships and interrelationships with self, community and creation (Baskin 2011; Mawhiney and Nabigon 2008; Verniest 2006). These are invaluable contributions to both the Indigenous intellectual tradition and to social work scholarship and practice. A problem, however, not with these works but with the climate in which these works circulate, is the mainstream cultural proclivity to cast Indigenous peoples in spiritual terms: that is, many non-Indigenous people see Indigenous peoples as being spiritual but neglect the other three dimensions of personhood as described in the Indigenous holistic model (physical, emotional, psychological), and the dominant culture reinforces this understanding through discursive formations, a culture that celebrates the reified ecological/spiritual Indian but allows little room for the flesh and blood political, intellectual, athletic Indigenous person.

In response to this climate of gross stereotyping in which the other is constructed and then reinscribed through quotidian social, cultural and media practices, we have deliberately resisted any discussion of Aboriginal spirituality in its more generic sense and argued in favour of the particular. If one is to discuss Aboriginal spirituality, it is probably best done in the context of the specificities of a particular community, for it is in the minutiae of such context-specific details that the possibility of stereotyping, whether negative or positive, romanticised or deprecated, is eradicated and that true understanding of Aboriginal spirituality and the robust nature of its situatedness and interconnectivity emerge. In making this case for the particular, we are not lapsing into an uncritical postmodern relativism; rather, this is a strong moral argument for attending to specifics so as not to risk participating in those practices that constrain Indigenous persons’ lives and perpetrate an ontological violence through profoundly limiting Indigenous ways of being, both in understanding and in practice. Essentialism can certainly be powerfully strategic when adopted and enacted by a group for political ends but not when imposed upon a people in an etic manner by a dominant group with a history (and contemporary practices) of colonialism.

**Conclusion**

Indigenous scholars and activists in Canada are making tremendous strides in the various areas outlined by Cardinal (1969) requiring redress: Aboriginal rights (Alfred 1999; Christie 2006;
McNeil 2007; Slattery 2005), education (Battiste 2000; Henderson 2000; Little Bear 2000), social issues (Baskin 2011; Blackstock 2007, 2009, 2011) and economic development (Jobin 2013; Wuttunee 2004). Indeed, Indigenous peoples are succeeding at making advances in all these areas despite the reluctance and lack of political will demonstrated by the government and mainstream society.

Indigenous spiritualities, both the understandings and practices of, are unequivocally a part of this process. However, to reduce Indigenous peoples to their spirituality and to ignore the many other dimensions of what constitutes Indigeneity is problematic. For any social worker, especially non-Indigenous social workers who want to be Indigenous allies, desiring to work in an Indigenous community or work with Indigenous service users elsewhere, it is necessary to be aware of the historical, political, cultural and social (perhaps linguistic) practices and realities of a specific community before assuming an understanding of spiritual dimensions. Without such grounding in specificities true dialogic relationship is not possible, and without dialogism, all that remains are the unproductive monologues that have characterised non-Indigenous relations with Indigenous peoples in this country since the seventeenth-century annals of the Jesuits.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful for the wisdom and encouragement of our colleague Val Napoleon in the development of this chapter.

References

Arielle Dylan and Bartholemew Smallboy


