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Recreating the social link between young children and their histories: Outline of a recuperative pedagogy for indigenous children and families

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My topic here today is surely an impossible one. Can we seriously expect that the perpetrators of cultural genocide will voluntarily seek to repair the incalculable damage they have done? Is what Paulo Freire (1969, 1970) called “education for freedom” or “education for critical consciousness” ever possible within ideological state apparatuses that are set up by states with the express purpose of controlling the ideology and thought processes of populaces in the interests of the governing classes? Or, as Audre Lorde (1984) put it, can the master’s tools ever be used to dismantle the master’s house?

Furthermore, for me as a white European, and a member of the academic establishment to stand before you and offer any opinion on these matters may indeed be a fool’s errand, or worse... an exercise in further extending colonial domination over indigenous ways of life, ways of knowing, and ways of being.

In *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1988), Vine Deloria describes how the scrutiny of anthropologists has been one of the greatest curses placed on American Indian peoples.

Deloria speaks of the annual migration by anthropologists to reservations to produce “you were there” reports that purport to “tell it like it is.” The problem, as Deloria notes, is that the anthropologist, embedded in an elite epistemology of social scientific inquiry, already knows what she or he will find:

You may be curious as to why the anthropologist never carries a writing instrument. He never makes a mark because he ALREADY KNOWS what he is going to find. He need not record anything except his daily expenses for the audit, for the anthro found his answers in the books he read the winter before. No, the anthro is only on the reservation to VERIFY what he has suspected all along – Indians are a very quaint people who bear watching. (p. 80)

Deloria speaks of how, following the conventions of academe, anthropologists begin their work having already developed a working concept of what it means to be Indian:

The massive volume of useless knowledge produced by anthropologists attempting to capture real Indians in a network of theories has contributed substantially to the invisibility of Indian people today. After all, who can conceive of a food-gathering, berry-picking, semi-nomadic, fire-worshipping, high-plains-and-mountain-dwelling, horse-riding, canoe-toting, bead-using, pottery-making, ribbon-coveting, wickiup-sheltered people who began flourishing when Albert Frump mentioned them in 1803 in *Our feathered friends* as real?

Not even Indians can relate themselves to this type of creature who, to anthropologists, is the “real” Indian. Indian people begin to feel that they are merely shadows of a mythical super-Indian. Many anthros spare no expense to

reinforce this sense of inadequacy in order to further support their influence over Indian people. (pp. 81-82)

Deloria's concern about academics creating conceptual prisons within which whole groups of Indians are essentialized takes an even more sinister turn when the self-interest of the researchers is scrutinized. His views represent a cautionary tale regarding the hazards posed when professional esteem and status depends on one's ability to create a product as a result of one's interactions with individuals who have been designated 'Other':

Perhaps we should suspect the real motives of the academic community. They have the Indian field well defined and under control. Their concern is not the ultimate policy that will affect the Indian people, but merely the creation of new slogans and doctrines by which they can climb the university totem pole.

Reduction of people to ciphers for purposes of observation appears to be inconsequential to the anthropologist when compared to the immediate benefits he can derive, the production of further prestige, and the chance to appear as the high priest of American society orienting and manipulating to his heart's desire. (pp. 94-95)

Even though I will attempt to delimit my remarks carefully so as not to speak beyond my own expertise, namely the consequences of intergenerational trauma and dislocation for indigenous peoples, I am still vulnerable to the charge that I am bringing a colonizer lens to the lives of people who are indeed Other to me. This is true. And the question I would like to leave you with is whether indeed any of us, including my esteemed colleague Jenny Ritchie, who has worked collaboratively with Māori people for

years, can ever divest ourselves of the colonizing and imperial gaze. Abdul JanMohamed is pessimistic, noting in 1995:

Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture... this entails in practice the virtually impossible task of negating one's very being, precisely because one's culture is what formed that being. Moreover, the colonizer's invariable assumption about his moral superiority means that he will rarely question the validity of his own or his society's formation and that he will not be inclined to expend any energy in understanding the worthless alterity of the colonized. (JanMohamed, 1995, p. 18)

Cultural genocide

In the preface to Ward Churchill's *Kill the Indian, Save the Man* (2004) George Tinker summarized the deadly process of cultural genocide:

Taken often by force, from their homes at ages as young as four, transported to facilities remote from their families and communities, confined there for a decade or more, relentlessly stripped of their cultural identities while being just as methodically indoctrinated to see their traditions - and thus themselves - through the eyes of their colonizers, chronically malnourished and overworked, drilled to regimental order and subjected to the harshest forms of corporal punishment, this was the lot of one in every two native youngsters in North America for five successive generations. Of those ushered into the steadily expanding system of residential schools during its first forty years or more, about half did not survive

the experience. In other words, roughly one-quarter of the American Indian population during the early twentieth century was physically destroyed by the process of schooling.

It is well to reiterate that this protracted horror was for the most part perpetrated by self-styled progressive politicians and liberal churchmen...Worth noting, too, is the fact that, for all their humanitarian veneer, the “enlightened” settler élite which advocated, implemented and maintained the system suffered no discernible qualms in hiring the very dregs of their society – sadists, pedophiles and the like – to preside over the indigenous youngsters consigned to residential institutions. Thus, as Churchill recounts in brief but agonizing detail, the “discipline” visited upon native children often assumed the form of outright torture. As well, sexual predation was common in most of the schools. At some it appears that every student, without exception, was raped, many of them regularly, over periods of years. (Tinker, 2004, p. xviii)

Susan Rose’s documentary *The Lost Ones: Long Journey Home*, which will be premiered here at RECE offers the tiniest glimpse into this genocide. Churchill offers a chilling reminder of how the savage was taken out of the Indian:

In psychological terms the regimen was deliberately and relentlessly brutal. From the moment the terrified and bewildered youngsters arrived at the schools, designed as they were to function as “total institutions,” a comprehensive and carefully-calibrated assault on their cultural identity would commence. For boys and girls alike, this began with a thorough scrubbing and “disinfection” – alcohol and kerosene were among the astringents used for this latter purpose – often

accompanied by staff commentary about “dirty Indians.” For boys, the next step was to undergo the humiliating experience of having their heads shorn military style. Although the shearing was/is usually passed off as more “hygiene,” it was not typically done to girls except as punishment, and must therefore be considered to have served a different purpose: “At the heart of the policy was the belief that the [boys’] long hair was symbolic of savagism; removing it was central” to destroying the sense of themselves as Indians.

The same was true of their clothing and personal items, all of which were taken from them. In exchange they were issued uniforms expressly intended to separate them from the “excessive individualism” of their own traditions by reducing them “to sameness, to regularity, to order.” Then came their names. Those with “savage” or “unpronounceable” identifiers like Chesegebegwa or Sithapetal, which included the great majority of new arrivals, quickly found themselves saddled with Anglicized names like “Smith” and “Miller” (renaming children after U.S. presidents and literary or historical figures like Henry Ward Beecher or Julius Caesar also seems to have been a source of amusement). A consistent theme running through autobiographical material written by former students is how this procedure in particular engendered an abiding sense that they’d “lost” themselves, and were “thus stranger[s,] with no possibilities for the future. (p. 19).

Residential School Syndrome

Since the last North American residential schools for Indians closed only a little over twenty years ago, it is hardly surprising that the effects would continue to be felt.

Consider the following testimonies. First, here is a chief of the Albany First nation testifying in Canada in 1990:

Social maladjustment, abuse of self and others and family breakdown are some of the symptoms prevalent among First Nations Babyboomers. The “Graduates” of the “Ste. Anne’s Residential School” era are now trying and often failing to come to grips with life as adults after being raised as children in an atmosphere of fear, loneliness, and loathing.

Fear of caretakers. Loneliness, knowing the elders and family were far away.

Loathing from learning to hate oneself, because of repeated physical, verbal or sexual abuse suffered at the hands of various adult caretakers. This is only a small part of the story. (Quoted in Milloy, 1999, pp. 295-96)

Consultants employed by the Assembly of First nations noted:

The survivors of the Indian residential school system have, in many cases, continued to have their lives shaped by the experiences in these schools. Persons who attended these schools continue to struggle with their identity after years of being taught to hate themselves and their culture. The residential schools led to a disruption in the transference of parenting skills from one generation to the next. Without these skills, many survivor had difficulty raising their own children. The lessons learned in childhood are often repeated in adulthood with the result that many survivors of the residential school system often inflict abuse on their own children. These children in turn use the same tools on their own children. (Quoted in Milloy, 1999, pp. 299)

In Canada, as Churchill notes, this cluster of symptoms has come to be known as Residential School Syndrome [RSS]. While Ward Churchill acknowledges the traumatic symptomatology associated with RSS, he is cautious about the reification of an “Indian disorder” that then subtly places blame on Indians for their own suffering. Instead, much as the authors in *Postcolonial Disorders* (Good et al., 2005; see also Lear, 2006; O’Loughlin, 2008) argue, RSS needs to be understood as suffering that emerges from the oppression of colonization. Arguing, for example, against the attribution of alcoholism among Native American to genetic differences, Churchill states

that while half of all native people have lately become alcoholics, an equal proportion were also processed through residential schools. In the same vein, although they share neither genetic or cultural characteristics with Native North Americans, other peoples subjected to long-term colonization on the English model – the Irish, for instance – have been notoriously beset by comparable rates of alcoholism, “schizophrenia” and other RSS-like maladies.

Pretending that a “genetic link to alcoholism” might cause the self-obliterating rather than social nature of American Indian drinking patterns does nothing, moreover, to explain why an ever-increasing number of native children have taken to inhaling the fumes of gasoline, solvents and other such substances in a deliberate attempt to *permanently* eradicate their consciousness. (p. 73)

The psychic and social consequences of severing social links

My work in recent years has been concerned with articulating a psychoanalytic theory of the consequences of collective trauma. If trauma cuts the threads of speech then

a process of reweaving and darning the narrative strands is necessary in order to re-establish the social links that give the lives of a group of people collective meaning and identity. Bearing in mind the specific case of indigenous soul wounds resulting from colonial conquest, and particularly from the collective trauma of residential schooling, in my recent writings I have offered a psychoanalytic explanation for the intergenerational trauma and other soul wounds that have resulted from residential schooling, and (2) I have explored the potential of reparative narratives grounded in ancestral wisdom and indigenous epistemologies to restore the collective fabric of indigenous communities. In the past two years I have written two papers on Aboriginal Australian suffering (O'Loughlin, 2008, 2009a); one on intergenerational trauma emanating from The Great Hunger in Ireland in the 1840s (O'Loughlin, 2012); one arguing for what I call a *psychoanalysis of the social* (O'Loughlin, 2010), and one on indigenous education (O'Loughlin, 2009b). I will draw on all of these papers here, and I will be glad to email any of those papers to any of you that may be interested.

The End of History: Cultural devastation and loss of hope?

In *Radical Hope* (2006) Jonathan Lear raises profound questions about what happens to a people that is confronted with annihilation; with the end of life as they know it. Lear bases his study on the life of Plenty Coups, a Crow chief who was head of his tribe at the time of the westward settler expansion in North America. Lear uses as his source a book by Frank Linderman, in which Plenty Coups muses about the meaning of the elimination of the buffalo herds on the plains. Plenty Coups summarized the moment this way: 'But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and

they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere’.

Lear goes on to explain how human subjectivity is taken up through group members becoming a certain way in a particular cultural context. For young men in Crow society, this identity was that of a warrior. What befell them when that warrior identification, with the status and identity it bestowed, was rendered obsolete? Lear says that for the young people who managed to survive poverty, geographic dislocation and settler diseases, the loss of tribal identity resulted in a massive sense of disorientation. Elaborating further, Lear argues that participation in creating narratives is crucial to the construction of individual and collective subjectivity. In effect Lear makes the case that the catastrophic collapse of Crow way of life led to a collapse of the possibilities of Crow subjectivity

Kai Erikson notes, we also need to pay attention to potential damage to the collective fabric of communities that can result from a systemic assault on a people of the kind that befell the Crow nation. Since community offers people means for dealing with pain, building contexts for intimacy, and for preserving rituals and traditions, damage to community is likely to be highly consequential. Drawing on his earlier writing, Erikson offers the following definition:

By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with ‘trauma.’ But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as

an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared ...

Louise Kaplan says that it is the lethal combination of the uncanny attunement that a child must have to parental emotional states in order to survive, coupled with the silence of a parent burdened either by shame, fear or loathing, or perhaps by ancestral phantoms of which they are not even aware, that produces the unspeakability in the child of their own emotional experiences that leads to the subsequent development of severe trauma symptoms. Healing phantomically traumatized children, therefore, requires resuscitating the capacity for speech and the revivification of narrative capabilities in the adults of a traumatized community so that, ultimately, as parental ghosts are exorcised, their children can be freed of their ghostly burdens and become well. If this is not done, we can expect the adults to act out their unconscious trauma and thereby perpetuate the damaging cycle of unprocessed trauma for another generation.

In *History Beyond Trauma* François Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière argue that madness may be induced through the severance of social links and the transmission across generations of unmetabolized trauma. How might we enable such groups to enter history and speak the unspoken that has so profoundly shaped their individual and collective experiences? In what way might the dead of our ancestral and spectral pasts live on within all of us? Who is equipped and willing to take on the responsibility of serving as what Davoine and Gaudillière call a ‘guarantor’ of those ancestral experiences being given voice from now on? Davoine and Gaudillière describe the process this way: ‘As we have seen, a baby may be assigned the role of *therapôn*, keeper of the mind for its

parents, the boundary of their irrationality, remaining welded to them by a bond that may prevent any attachment?

The telescoping of generations and a psychoanalysis of the social

In *The Telescoping of Generations* Haydée Faimberg revisits Freud's notion of *nachträglichkeit*, popularized in English under the French term *après coup*. This refers to the coming to awareness and hence to significance of something that was experienced or absorbed at an earlier time without its full emotional significance having been registered at that time.

Faimberg also speaks of a “telescoping of generations” when a person becomes the unconscious recipient of traumatic knowledge from a parent. The identification with this unspoken knowledge telescopes generational time and traps the person in an unconscious identification with the suffering of that parent or even with an earlier ancestor whose trauma the parent had inherited. A clue to this difficulty, Faimberg notes, is that the person's desire becomes organized around the blank space where the trauma or gap is located. Hence the person, locked into an identification with an unmourned loss, has difficulty “going on being,” to use a favorite Winnicottian expression.

The puzzling question, as Louise Kaplan notes, is how a child, in the presence of a parent who either refuses to speak of a trauma or who cannot speak of the trauma because it is has either been dissociated or else received as a blank and unspeakable legacy from ancestors nonetheless comes to embody their suffering. The answer appears to be that the blankness in parental affect elicits a caretaking response from the child. This can be detected, Kaplan notes, in the disproportionate space that the parent occupies

in the child's mind. The *parentified* child, then, suppresses the possibility of articulating a desire for its own growth and wellbeing in order to attempt to secure the future of the parent.

Such an inversion of the normal symmetry of familial relations is precipitated by an incapacity for dialogue on the parent's part and results in an unhealthy "precocious attunement" (p. 226) on the child's part. Kaplan summarizes the process elegantly: "Because of these abrupt and unexpected derailments in dialogue, the child becomes a witness to what happened to the parent" (p. 227).

Speaking to the ghost: Addressing the sociohistorical dimensions of subjectivity

Locating children in history, is, of course, more complex than merely addressing the emotional underpinnings of individual experience. Children are born into sociopolitical and familial systems, and they may be recipients of intergenerationally transmitted individual or communal trauma.

This tension comes into sharpest relief in the case of education for indigenous peoples for a number of reasons. First, the gap between indigenous epistemologies and westernized narratives of technology, individualization, capitalism, and progress is exceedingly wide. Second, the insult to indigenous people from the kind of collective trauma produced by the Indian conquest in North America, the seizure of indigenous resources and the annihilation of indigenous economies and ways of life worldwide, and the incalculable damage caused by the residential school movement have left indigenous children vulnerable on many fronts. Is recovery in such contexts possible?

I explore the possibility of healing children in terms of two educational ideas, evocative pedagogy and regenerative curriculum.

Evocative pedagogy and regenerative curriculum

Evocative pedagogy requires a specific acknowledgment of the collective history of a people, tribe, or community. Teachers who work with such children would benefit from a working knowledge of how collective traumas produced by war, displacements, genocides, annihilation of religious and cultural values, and the systemic erasure of ancestral memory and language can have profound traumatic effects on contemporary members of the community. Teachers and others who work with children could be trained in local history, culture, music, ancestral spirit knowledge, etc. so that they can create opportunities with community children and elders to evoke the spectral memory of both past injury and ancestral knowledge in the service of allowing children to fully identify with the origins of their own unconscious coming-to-be.

The epistemological and identificatory possibilities of narrative are enhanced by introducing children to multiple modes of narrating, privileging particularly narrative modes that embody the ancestral lore, rituals, and worldviews that particular indigenous children have inherited. Curriculum, in this conceptualization, is an organic process that gets constructed with children and with community stakeholders for the children of that particular community. Teachers might then consider themselves as documentarians of the collective unconscious of the community, documentarians of existing lore, and documentarians of the processes and products involved in constructing new forms of lore with children and community members.

If indeed we can acknowledge subjectivity as sociohistorically constituted and spectrally located, then an engaging, revivifying, and ancestrally anchored curriculum process would seem to be indicated if we aspire to recreate social links and give children of a particular community a possibility of moving forward with a sense of history, pride, and belonging. Indigenous children who have been rendered *loreless*, to use Judy Atkinson's (2002) term need opportunities to re-inscribe themselves in their history in order to heal soul wounds and fully experience their own subjective possibilities.

If severance of the social link comes from the foreclosure of history, then a major focus of curriculum ought to be on the regeneration of those links by assisting children in experiencing their latent historical subjectivities and in claiming a specific indigenous identity.

Children who have had their experience of their histories foreclosed will live with *lack*, but are likely to be unaware of the causes of the absence within. Therefore, in addressing the needs of such children we need to figure out how to engage with the unconscious knowledge in their lives. Classrooms are filled with silent ghosts – silent spectral realms of unanchored anguish and lost possibility. Teachers need to be taught how to go beyond imparting inert, dominant culture cognitive knowledge, and should be prepared to engage children in emotionally and imaginatively liberatory pedagogy rooted in ancestral lore but widening to a future of healing and possibility.

I envisage a curriculum that will bend, stretch, and even transcend *logos*—and particularly the institutionalized and bureaucratized *logos* of dominant culture schooling. For teachers to become guarantors for the *speakability* of children's unnamable

experience, I suggest, they must be prepared to enter into a sympathetic conversation—a deep existential encounter—with children, individually and collectively.

I propose using the kinds of understandings discussed here to articulate what I will call an *evocative* pedagogy for children. This is a pedagogy that by addressing the unconscious, the soul, and the spirit, has the capacity to unhook particular, culturally located children from the anomie of an amnesiac, universalist, globalized consumer society to begin to reconnect with the latent historical subjectivities deep within their own beings and in their communities of origin. This can lead to a way forward anchored in the historical and spiritual past and it offers an alternative to a life haunted by an unnamable past.

In seeking cultural authenticity, teachers hardly want to engage in hegemonic appropriations of authenticity. To the extent that they do, paradoxically, the result is to taint genuine authenticity so that paradoxically the *real* and *authentic* feels fake! As Native American Writer Vine Deloria Jr. noted with respect to authentic Indians. Trinh Minh-ha points out that even with changes to make our language *sound* inclusive, western academics continue to define themselves as the reference point or norm against which all others are measured, and speaking specifically of women's identity, she points out that such Othering can make a person feel quite mad. The antidote to this madness, as Trinh sees it, is to recognize that in addition to the factual truths enshrined in westernized ways of knowing, there are also narrative truths that speak to the inherited wisdom of groups of people. This qualitative notion of understanding has much more to do with accumulated cultural truths, than with any enlightenment (Trinh calls it “endarkenment”) form of objective knowing. This form of storytelling is the stuff of which community can

be built. Trinh suggests that grand narrative *History* concerns itself with very different truths from a history that is concerned with the truths of fiction, magic and myth. This constructive form of storytelling is, Trinh notes, anathema to *civilized* people who have no doubt about their ability to distinguish fact from fiction and who insist on a rigorous “apartheid” between the two. In Trinh’s thinking story is a powerfully regenerative force: “So that living traditions can never congeal into fixed forms, so that life keeps on nurturing life, so that what is understood as the Past continues to provide the link to the present and the future.”

If societies continue to *train* teachers generically in dominant culture epistemologies and worldviews, education for indigenous children will continue to perpetuate traumatizing cultural hopelessness. There is no generic recipe for indigenous education. To be successful as revolutionary and hopeful pedagogy, teacher preparation and classroom education must be locally grown. Such local pedagogies cannot exist within official schooling. The challenge in creating the pedagogy I propose lies not in the logistics of implementation, but is a matter of sovereignty: Who ultimately gets to control education for indigenous peoples? Or, perhaps it could be phrased more honestly: Shall we continue to perpetuate a dominant culture pedagogy that provides indigenous peoples with the terrible choice, as Gregory Phillips notes, between instant cultural death and what he calls “the living death of assimilation”? Or could we perhaps furnish sufficient resources and sufficient local control that indigenous peoples can take charge of articulating their destinies once more?

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