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Critical Indigenism and Adult Learning and Education

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Abstract: *Critical indigenism is an aboriginal-inspired re/visioning of critical pedagogy, a re/grounding of Freirean praxis, and a challenge to “Western” knowledge making. This paper, based on the author’s journeys into Indian country, explores the ways that Native American art—as expressed in three diverse arenas: cinema, Rez Rap, and pottery-making—offer opportunities to explore the intersection of critical indigenism and adult learning and education.*

Situating the Subject

As a Euro-American, my interest in Indigenous pedagogy began in earnest in the summer of 2007 while living and studying at the Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico with an elder and potter in the “old town”—a Pueblo built in the 1500s. I lived a few meters from the location where Spanish conquistadores burned alive 400 women and children in the late 1500s. Paradoxically, the Pueblo “tse-ping” (“belly button,” the point of emergence from the underworld to become “the People”) was at this same location. The following summer I studied with a traditional Diné (Navajo) elder and her daughter at Table Mesa, New Mexico. One is a potter, both are weavers, shepherders, and environmental advocates. I was invited in both instances to study traditional lifeways. During my journey I came to realize how creative acts were a means for constructing individual and group identities, for resistance to political and economic neo-colonial projects, and for building an ecological ethic and an indigenous cosmology.

Introduction

Two centuries of Western colonial projects have resulted in the occupation of non-Western minds, cultures, languages, landscapes, and bodies. Colonized people include Native Americans who have witnessed cultural exploitation, appropriation of their land and natural resources, enslavement, and extermination on the magnitude of a holocaust (Deloria, 1988/1969). Today, the “Whitestreaming” of Native America continues. Whitestreaming is the notion that U.S. society “remains principally and fundamentally structured on the basis of the Anglo-European ‘White’ experience” (Grande, 2008, pp. 250-251). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) describe an explosion of scholarship beginning in the late 1980s at the intersection of Freirean liberation, a new generation of critical research scholarship, and the clash of critical theory with poststructuralism. At this confluence, multiple resistances have emerged, including “subaltern, First Nation, and Red pedagogies” (p. xi)—and critical indigenism, among a host of others.

Purpose, Methodology, Literature and Theoretical Considerations

The purpose of this study was to describe fundamental characteristics and processes of critical indigenism using selected personal experiences from my journey into Indian Country, and to illustrate how the field of adult education can benefit from dialoging with critical indigenism. This work represents a portion of a larger endeavour to assist in the decolonizing

efforts by both Native American and Euro-American people (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008). It flows from my living in a “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991) with Native Americans—a social space where cultures met and wrestle with each other. The process, like “Red pedagogies” (Grande, 2004), is an invitation to help decolonize the lifeworld of the “Other.” Scholarly literature is replete with post-colonial theorizing as a response to the hegemony of Western imperialism (Krishna, 2009). This study is situated in that tradition, at the intersection of critical indigenous discourse (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008), Red pedagogies (Grande, 2004), and arts-based inquiry (Clover & Stalker, 2006). It explores the extent to which critical indigenism may be relevant to adult learning and education.

Critical Indigenism

Critical indigenism is an emerging perspective that encompasses different critical methods and methodologies (Steinhauer, 2002). It is a merger of critical and indigenous pedagogies in ways leading to social change that are political and ideological. Key elements include: learning by observation and doing, learning through experiences, learning through enjoyment, honoring the notion of watching before acting, respecting social values, embracing “both the circumstances people find themselves in and their beliefs about those circumstances in a way that is unfamiliar to Eurocentric knowledge systems, which distinguish clearly between the two” (*Indigenous pedagogy*, 2009, para 1). Critical indigenism employs Mackeracher’s (2004, p. 17) questions, “Who is learning what?” “From whom?” “By what approach?” “For what purpose?” “Under what circumstances?” and with what consequences?” Thomas (1991) would further these interrogatives by additionally asking, “At whose expense?”

Three Art Forms: Portals into Critical Indigenism

Western perspectives are built on “independence, separation, and hierarchies” (Merriam, 2007, p. 3), and rely on linearity, and rationality, whereas many other cultures experience life as circular and the world as interconnected realities—that is, all that exists is an interdependent, associated whole (Ntuli, 2002). “Ancestral teachings, rooted in geographical and spiritual realities, continue to shape and transform lives of indigenous adult educators and learners” (Graveline, 2005, p. 305) but have largely escaped White educators. To many indigenous people, knowledge is local and community based and at the same time holistic; learning takes on a form of group cooperation and collaboration. The roles of “remembering, reclamation, and collective witness” are fundamental to the process of decolonization from Eurocentric conscientiousness (Nadeau & Young, 2006). This paper uses my experiences of three art forms: cinema (the film, *Woven Ways*), music (Rez Rap/Native Hip Hop), and Native pottery as portals into critical indigenous inquiry, and points to the contributions made to adult learning and education.

Film: Woven Ways

During the summer of 2008 I lived with two interlocutors featured in the film, *Woven Ways*. They are mother and daughter weavers; the elder is also a maker of traditional Diné pottery. Every morning I would open the hogan door that faced East, into the rising sun, to sprinkle corn pollen in the Diné way of blessing the day. What first caught my eye, however, was not the sun on the surrounding magnificent pinnacles and mesas. Rather, it was the mysterious, yellow-green air that pressed down on the skyline—pollution from local coal power plants.

During my stay, my hosts spoke sadly of the loss of vegetation from environmental contamination, and thus the decline of quality grazing for their life-giving sheep. The documentary film, *Woven Ways*, a collaborative educational effort of indigenous (including my hosts) and non-indigenous people to engage in the decolonization of Native Americans, depicts how Indians are Gramscian organic intellectuals who use indigenous knowledge and active resistance to subvert subjugation at the hands of exploitation and corporate greed.

Adult education as survival. Stories told to me, and those from the film, were often about the continued struggle of the Diné to learn to survive—in this instance, from pollution and the destruction of their traditional lifeways because of it. The Diné are engaged in environmental education, grassroots organizing, community development, activism as a form of adult education, non-Anglo ways of knowing, and contesting broken government public policies. On trips to collect clay for making pots, my teacher would recall stories of a more pristine time, or point to wild desert medicinal or food plants now dying—and the impacts that this loss has on the Diné way. The voice and volume of the Diné, portrayed in the film, was lived reality.

Adult education and story telling. As I became accepted to many Diné, stories were increasingly shared with me. Similarly, *Woven Ways* is a series of “story-tellings”—narratives that are central to the educational endeavour. Mackeracher (2004) provides that learning has far more than a cognitive dimension. It also includes the affective (emotional), kinaesthetic, relational, spiritual, and environmental domains. Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo/Sioux), reminds us that story telling is the Native “formal method of indirect teaching” (2007, p. 42). Tessie Naranjo (Santa Clara Pueblo elder whose adobe home was next to mine, and with whom I spent considerable time) offers that “stories convey our reality, our hopes, and our dreams....Storytelling connects us to our past. [They give] us the basis from which to grow and become productive members of our society” (2004, p. xi). Stories help to pass on identity and teach social expectations and a sense of humanity’s place in the universe. Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), in the Native American novel, *Ceremony* (1977), reports that stories “are all we have...all we have to fight off illness and death. You don’t have anything if you don’t have stories....evil is mighty but it can’t stand up to our stories....” (p. 2). The stories in *Woven Ways*, and those shared with me, were incantations to ward off the colonial spell of malevolence.

Ecology and adult education and learning. Indigenous epistemologies are based on the immediate ecology. Major problems shared with me by the Diné, and featured in *Woven Ways*, included pollution and the changing climate that is altering the ecosystem. The loss of forage for sheep meant the land now supports fewer of them, which means less wool, which ultimately translates into the loss of woven textiles (e.g., Navajo blankets and rugs), leading to the destruction of cultural identity and traditional lifeways. Perhaps more importantly, the cascading environmental damage, disrupts harmony and balance. To many indigenous groups, “harmony [depends] on recognizing that all beings have a place within the community and must be accorded respect, however curious according respect to ‘inanimate objects’ might seem to those reared otherwise” (Allen, 2007, p. 45).

Music: Rez Rap

During one of my visits to the Navajo Reservation, I encountered the rapper “Chosen” who shared a demo CD with me. Of the many striking songs, these lines are examples of how

Rap allows Native youth to navigate the tension zone between destructive behaviors and striving for *hózhó* (a complex philosophy and central concept within their cosmology, *hózhó* expresses stability, happiness, the moral notion of good, health and well-being, and aesthetic dimensions of balance, harmony, and beauty), and between identity and assimilation. The lines are,

“...for all those who have been exposed to some form of judgment. For thos who build defenses against any form of prejudice. Ya see we’re gonna expose these injustices y’all ‘cause to ... expose ‘em is to kill ‘em.... I gotta get this off a my chest y’all. And I ask u to forgive me for soundin’ ignorant. It’s not my fault, they made me like this, so if they kill me, put ur heads up. [Refrain: put your heads up, put your fists to the sky, resistance is my only reply, ‘cause the price of freedom is what keeps us free. Overthrow government lies and powers that be].”

Here rap music is a narrative that expresses Native youths’ collective stories. “[Rez Rap] offers insights into the politics, concerns, and dreams of [Indian youth]: confronting racism, seeking respectful and relevant educational opportunities in spite of disintegrating traditional community and familial ties, and hoping to build upon cultural strengths while continuing to struggle with poverty, drugs and alcohol abuse, and violence” (Lashua, 2006, para 2). While it may be considered “Rant and Roll” music, it is also deeply pedagogical, and portrays activism as a form of educational resistance to Outsider occupation of life and homeland, and something worth dying for.

Visual Art: Native Pottery-Making

As a guest of a traditional Diné family I came to understand potting it as a means by which individual and group identity was constructed, an environmental ethic sustained, and an indigenous cosmology re/told. The summer before my time with the Diné, I lived at the Santa Clara Pueblo also studying pottery. A family member from Santa Clara created a clay work that depicts women, men, and children around a bowl filled with beans. The artist details how the bowl represents the tribal “naval.” The bowl becomes a troupe for the site of their creation myth. She recounts that each Pueblo village has a “tse-ping” (belly button). Both the village tse-ping and the clay bowl remind them that they are born from the earth and remain earth-centered. The artist writes, “We all come from the earth....Because of that we become one family¹.” To the Pueblo people pottery *is* about learning how to live. The Acoma Pueblo matriarch, Lucy Lewis (d. 1992), has asserted, “We consider our pots to have a life of their own.” They are living, they are teachers.

In the Pueblo and on the Reservation I learned that potting is both a way of knowing and is in itself a form of reasoning and inquiry. For Native Americans potting is an enactment that makes cultural connections and discoveries to land, ancestors, living people, animals, and the Spirit world. Potting also guides experience and inquiry. Creating with mud illustrates that “the arts are not simply about mastery of technical skills, but that technical skills are merely a gateway into non-linguistic thinking” (Siegesmund, 2004, p. 80). Potting shows how knowledge production and culture are inseparable—not just knowledge about potting technology, but about the stories pots tell regarding how to be, to belong, to become in the world. Potting develops a kind of “visual literacy” for both the potter and the beholder. Pottery is also about re/membering. Native American pottery is a “space” where indigeniety is learned and practiced. The current loss of knowledge regarding the making of a utilitarian pot does not only impoverish the world—

there are many utensils available for cooking—it means the loss of what it is to be Native American.

Implications for Adult Learning and Education

Critical indigenism offers ALE lessons that include: the survival value of learning by observation and doing; learning through situated experiences; learning through enjoyment and through protest; the essentiality of culturally based education; learning for continued existence; narratives/story-telling as central to the adult education enterprise; the centrality of affective, kinaesthetic, relational, spiritual, and environmental domains in learning; the significance of the immediate ecology to learning and education; and how anti-imperialist discourses are taking place outside of hegemonic power centers (in subaltern movements, see Abdi & Kapoor, 2009).

Through critical indigenism we learn the significance of embracing both the circumstances of people's lives and their valuing of beliefs about those circumstances. Merriam (2007) reminds us, "To restrict one's understanding of the world to Western science precludes learning...from what other perspectives have to offer" (p. 1). We should learn from the phrase "world view" that there are "fundamentally different worlds to view" (West, 1996, p. 2). Critical indigenism is a portal—an escape hatch—into different worlds, not only to view, but to enter, to be transformed, and to learn from Native Americans in their process of self-emancipation.

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