

## BECOMING PRESENT BY BEARING WITNESS

Rather than appreciating that Aboriginal people are “human agents actively resisting oppression by dominant Canadian society,” too many teachers, Susan D. Dion declares, convey a “dehumanized representation of Aboriginal people,” what she terms the discourse of the “romantic, mythical Other,” a “people of the past.”<sup>1</sup> What Aboriginal people remember about the past, Dion tells us, “is what many Canadians would like to forget.”<sup>2</sup> Despite Canadians self-perception as “defenders of human rights,” Dion continues, “the long history of oppressive actions taken against Aboriginal people is a direct contradiction to that understanding.”<sup>3</sup> What is taught in schools is that “white Euro-Canadian dominant culture is superior to other cultures” and that “members of this culture occupy a place of privilege in society because they deserve it.”<sup>4</sup> Despite these delusions, teachers “desire to generate engaging lessons and respectful images of Aboriginal people,” but, Dion believes they fail: students absorb the image of the Aboriginal as entirely Other.<sup>5</sup>

Within the First Nations “stories have always been valued as a means of teaching and learning,” Dion notes, “not just entertainment but power,” representing “the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships, and attitudes of a people and can be used to bring harmony and balance to all beings.”<sup>6</sup> Aboriginal stories are forms of “commemoration that will be made personal,” Dion explains, thereby transforming listeners’ self-understanding and “their relations with First Nations people.”<sup>7</sup> Fidelity is not only to listeners, however, it is to “our ancestors” being “conscious of our pedagogical and political responsibilities”<sup>8</sup> while “being honest and trustworthy with ourselves, our subjects, and our readers.”<sup>9</sup>

Dion worries that non-Aboriginal Canadians fail to listen to stories of the “post-contact experiences of First Nations peoples,” a failure maintained through “various mechanisms,” among them: disputing the “relevance” of Aboriginal accounts to “life in the present” by “locking” past events in “history,” thereby “dehumanizing Aboriginal people” while insisting “there is nothing I can do, therefore I don’t have to listen,” “asserting that the stories are too hard to listen to.”<sup>10</sup> Dion quips: “Hard to listen to? Try surviving them.”<sup>11</sup>

As an educator, Dion allows, one must be willing to understand and reply to “resistance,”<sup>12</sup> but when resistance takes the form of “respectful admirer” or “patronizing helper,”<sup>13</sup> there is little room to move. Canadians’ self-image as “defenders of human rights” and “peacekeepers” persists despite “dehumanized representation of Aboriginal people and the denial and erosion of their culture and histories.”<sup>14</sup> Dion critiques the Bering Strait theory, asserting that it “dismisses as myth Aboriginal conceptions of creation and delegitimizes land claims based on the presence of Aboriginal people on this land since time immemorial,” teaching instead “furs and

feathers, tipis and longhouses, canoes and snowshoes,” teaching that “positions Aboriginal people as primitive inhabitants of the past.”<sup>15</sup>

Such teaching, Dion insists, reflects a “Eurocentric ideology,” positioning descendants of European settlers as “superior to the inferior Aboriginal Other,”<sup>16</sup> now relegated to “historical footnotes,” relevant insofar as useful to “European exploration, settlement, and nation building,” Aboriginal peoples cast as “victims” of “progress,” evoking in non-Aboriginal students “feelings of pity.”<sup>17</sup> The story students must study, she stipulates, is one of “conquest and resistance, of invasion, violence, and destruction,” the prehistory of the contemporary “relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians.”<sup>18</sup>

Dion’s Braiding Histories Project installed this latter story into the school curriculum, underscoring teachers’ “responsibilities for teaching” Aboriginal subject material,<sup>19</sup> requiring a “rethinking of post-contact history and its implication for present actions and future possibilities,” emphasizing – through “dialogue and reflection” - Aboriginal people “as human agents actively resisting oppression.”<sup>20</sup> That fact Dion was committed to enact, writing “in a way that would honour the strength and humanity of Aboriginal people,” and “in a way that would engage teachers and students in rethinking their understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians,” a project that became a “labour of self-understanding.”<sup>21</sup>

Dion identifies “three discourses of professionalism” – “teaching well, pastoral care, and citizenship education” - that inform teachers’ conceptions of “their responsibilities as teachers.”<sup>22</sup> Inform but not define, as teachers are also informed by “their understanding of their relationship with Aboriginal people.”<sup>23</sup> This “understanding” of “relationship” Dion attempts to clarify in an exercise she assigned to students in a graduate-level Indigenous knowledge course, in which she asked students to juxtapose images from their past with content from the course readings and with work by Aboriginal artists, thereby creating “stereoscopic images,” enabling “students to see the positions they occupy in relation to, and with, Aboriginal people and, importantly, how it is they came to occupy those positions.”<sup>24</sup> In my terms, this is the labour of subjective and social reconstruction, as Dion is asking students

to make themselves present ... bearing witness to their own inscription ... reworking of the normalized frames of understanding themselves as perfect strangers to Aboriginal people.<sup>25</sup>

Such reconstruction requires laying bare of students’ “relationship with Aboriginal people” through “acts of remembrance” - enabling “change in their ways of knowing and their ways of teaching.”<sup>26</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

The concept of braiding – methodologically mirrored methodologically in the concept of *métissage*<sup>27</sup> - complicates the concept of curriculum integration, as the concept emphasizes the distinctiveness of the various strands comprising the curriculum. Juxtaposition can create tension but, as in Aoki’s view, such tension can be generative, not necessarily dialectically (resulting in synthesis, a form of integration) but in clarifying conceptions, their genealogies and trajectories. By entering into sustained relationship with facts (and fictions) of Aboriginal peoples, settlers can confront their own subjective formation as culturally and personally superior. Memory – personal and collective, registered in stories – provides the lived ground for altering the colonial legacy contemporaries inherit, as settler students can re-braid their own subjective formations. Remembrance<sup>28</sup> has been a key concept<sup>29</sup> in curriculum studies, as I suspect “braiding” will be.

## REFERENCES

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Dion 2009, 4.
- <sup>2</sup> Dion 2009, 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Dion 2009, 5.
- <sup>4</sup> Dion 2009, 8.
- <sup>5</sup> Dion 2009, 8.
- <sup>6</sup> Dion 2009, 15-16. Without empirical evidence, allegations against teachers and students – that the former are racist, the latter unwitting victims – would seem to be a “story,” one that nonetheless represents Aboriginal peoples’ experience, although not necessarily bringing “harmony” to “all beings.”
- <sup>7</sup> Dion 2009, 18.
- <sup>8</sup> Dion 2009, 18.
- <sup>9</sup> Dion 2009, 31.
- <sup>10</sup> Dion 2009, 56.
- <sup>11</sup> Dion 2009, 57.
- <sup>12</sup> Dion 2009, 57.
- <sup>13</sup> Dion 2009, 58.
- <sup>14</sup> Dion 2009, 61.
- <sup>15</sup> Dion 2009, 65.
- <sup>16</sup> Dion 2009, 65.
- <sup>17</sup> Dion 2009, 73.
- <sup>18</sup> Dion 2009, 73-74.
- <sup>19</sup> Dion 2009, 78-79.
- <sup>20</sup> Dion 2009, 86.
- <sup>21</sup> Dion 2009, 177.
- <sup>22</sup> Dion 2009, 177-178.
- <sup>23</sup> Dion 2009, 177-178.
- <sup>24</sup> Dion 2009, 182.
- <sup>25</sup> Dion 2009, 182.
- <sup>26</sup> Dion 2009, 190.
- <sup>27</sup> See Donald 2009; Hasebe-Ludt and Leggo 2018; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo 2009. Thanks to Kiera Brant-Birioukov for bringing this point to my attention.
- <sup>28</sup> See Simon 2005.
- <sup>29</sup> See Wearing et al. 2020.