Indigenous Story-telling and Métissage

The practice of story-telling, Judy Iseke reports, is central to Indigenous cultures, as it "sustains communities, validates experiences and epistemologies, expresses experiences of Indigenous peoples, and nurtures relationships and the sharing of knowledge."[1] It also structures "Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and research approaches," a claim she documents by excerpting stories by Métis Elders whose stories teach "about life" as they witness and remember, thereby serving as sources of spiritual "strength."[2] Enacting "oral traditions, indigenous story-telling registers "historical/ancestral knowledges," serving as "cultural resources to examine current events and Indigenous understandings in ways consistent with traditional worldviews and cosmologies."[3]

The spirituality of these stories, Iseke suggests, inheres not only in the stories themselves but also in "the space created when they are being shared," encouraging "spiritual reciprocity," including "deep respect."[4] Citing Shawn Wilson, Iseke reports that "some stories, because of their sacredness, should not be revealed [as] this strips them of their spiritual and sacred elements."[5] A "respectful stance" is required, even a "reverence for the sharing of stories."[6] She casts "elders" and other "cultural keepers" as "researchers of the natural world and our relationships to it," encouraging "interrelationships" to "teach … the next generation."[7]

Citing Cree Elder Jerry Saddleback (through Wilson), Iseke lists three levels of stories, the highest being "sacred stories," which "must be told at different levels according to the initiation level of the listener," stories that, she admits, "maybe shouldn't even talk[ed] about."[8] At the second level are "Indigenous legends" that are "mythical," teaching "morals, lessons, or events."[9] The third level contains "personal stories or personal experiences, are often used by Elders in teaching and counselling."[10] Understanding storytelling as "witnessing and remembering allows engagement with ideas of the past and supports transforming ourselves today."[11]

Such "transforming," Iseke continues, includes a "process of recovering from colonization and its effects and of remaking ourselves," as storytelling shows "who we are meant to be."[12] Through such self-understanding, she suggests that the Indigenous learn "where we come from, what we understand, and how we belong, we make ourselves and our connections to our world.[13] "Through storytelling and ceremonial life," she explains,

> we are involved in the lifeways of a people, culture, community, family, and tradition, and in it we make a new story today of our connections. Whether our stories are pedagogical or witnessing and therefore have a teaching function, or ceremonial and have a spiritual connection, the stories are important to our cultural life.[14]

Stories are, then, also ceremonial.

The active listening Iseke describes invokes empathy and engagement, and thus storytelling, as a "research practice," initiates a "process of understanding oneself," emphasizing "context," from which research "cannot be separated or generalized."[15] Despite this "seeming specificity," storytelling's "value" exceeds any "single location or event because the transformative effect of the stories can continue with those who hear the stories and take up the challenges of transformation posed in the stories."[16]

Dwayne Donald promises a "report on the theoretical origins of a decolonizing research sensibility called Indigenous Métissage," simultaneously a "decolonizing research sensibility" and a "research praxis"[17] that encourages connections between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples occupying what is now called Canada. Those origins he summarizes with the term "frontier," and he intends to disclose "the logics that tend to inform them [these origins]," logics he decodes "as conceptual problems that require rethinking on more ethically relational terms."[18] He asserts that "the postcolonial emphasis on hybridity fails to acknowledge Indigenous subjectivity in ethical ways," requiring "an indigenized form of métissage focused on rereading and reframing Aboriginal and Canadian relations and informed by Indigenous notions of place."[19] Repurposing the European notion of "hermeneutic imagination," Donald characterizes métissage as "the telling of a story that belies colonial frontier logics and fosters decolonizing."[20]

Donald argues that "we" – the referent unspecified but from context clues it would seem to include both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples - "need more complex understandings of human relationality that traverse deeply learned divides of the past and present by demonstrating that perceived civilizational frontiers are actually permeable and that perspectives on history, memory, and experience are connected and interreferential."[21] Once achieved, "the key challenge," Donald continues, "is to find a way to hold these understandings in tension without the need to resolve, assimilate, or incorporate."[22] For Donald, that "way" is "Indigenous Métissage,"[23] a practice, he adds, "inspired by Plains Cree and Blackfoot philosophical insights that emphasize contextualized and place-based ecological interpretations of ethical relationality."[24] Such "interpretations" are not narrowly conceptual; they "support the emergence of a decolonizing research sensibility that provides a way to hold together the ambiguous, layered, complex, and conflictual character of Aboriginal and Canadian relations without the need to deny, assimilate, hybridize, or conclude."[25] Métissage, Donald continues, allows attentiveness to these "tensions," in fact bringing "their ambiguous and difficult character to expression through researching and writing," helping him "interpret and express – tell – what I know firsthand of the colonial character of contemporary relationships linking Aboriginals and Canadians."[26]

While a "sensibility," métissage is also a methodology, as it "mixes and

purposefully juxtaposes diverse forms of texts as a way to reveal that multiple sources and perspectives influence experiences and memories," affirming "relationality" as it "treats texts – and lives – as relational and braided rather than isolated and independent."[27] This is no decontextualized relationality, as Donald "explicitly connect[s] métissage to the legacies of colonialism and the need for recognition of the mutual vulnerability and dependency of colonizer and colonized, insider and outsider, as well as the presumed primacy of 'literate' societies over repressed oral traditions and storytelling."[28] Upping the ante, Donald substitutes "intimacy" for "relationality" when he calls for a "theory of métissage that can help us comprehend" what connects Aboriginal and Canadian peoples, encouraging the "creation of more ethical terms for extending these relations."[29] He contrasts his view with "multiculturalism," which he judges "Eurocentric," and derived from a "postcolonial theorizing of hybridity, which relies heavily upon an anti-essentialist discourse and strives towards perceived 'newness' through the displacement of place-based notions of tradition and collectivity."[30] Moreover, he uses "the term Indigenous in combination with métissage," as it is "informed by Indigenous values, ethics, and ways of knowing, but will not be specifically limited to those perspectives."[31] While central, then, "the term Indigenous does not connote an exclusionary type of métissage," but it does denote the specificity of it; it "could not happen elsewhere."[32]

Donald emphasizes this last point, reiterating that "Indigenous Métissage is about particular places in Canada … that have contentious histories in that the stories that Aboriginal peoples tell of them [and which] do not seem to coincide with Canadians' histories and memories of those same places," adding that "Aboriginal peoples come to know the land and identify with significant places through such stories."[33] Thus, he continues, a "central goal of doing Indigenous Métissage is to bring Aboriginal place-stories to bear on public policy discussions in educational contexts in appropriate and meaningful ways," stories that "encourage people to rethink and reframe their received understandings of the place now called Canada and thus better comprehend the significance of Aboriginal presence and participation today."[34]

The primacy of the particular is evident when Donald writes: "To provide an aperture into the unique character and complexity of the particular place of concern in the inquiry, interpretations stemming from Indigenous Métissage are grounded in the use of a specific artifact that comes from that place," an artifact particular to that place, "perceived to belong there, naturally or characteristically."[35] While "artifacts are tangible," he explains, "there are subtle and abstract meanings and concepts – metaphysicalities – inseparable from their physical matter that emanate from their history, their use, and the ways in which they are presently conceptualized based upon this history."[36] One is reminded the religious icon in Eastern Christianity.[37]

Curiously, Donald then seems to depart from this understanding, focusing not on a particular place but a generic concept, one on which he has focused before, the

"fort," a "metaphor" he says at first ("because it conjures up so many conflicting images of colonizer and colonized, the duality of insider/outsider, and the differing relationships to land and place") yet also literal, as "almost every major city in Canada has some nostalgic rendition of a historic fort."[38] Simultaneously literal and metaphoric, then, the fort could serve as a thread in "weaving a textual braid through Indigenous Métissage," enacting a "convergence of wide and diverse influences in an ethically relational manner."[39] In fact, for Donald "ethical relationality [is] exemplified through braidedness."[40] Returning to particularity, he admonishes the "weaver of the braid [to] remain mindful that each research context must be explored and evaluated based on the particular character of the situation."[41] Such historiographic reconstruction has a political aim, however, as it seeks lay bare (quoting Guba and Lincoln) "the content and meaning of competing constructions,"[42] placing Indigenous Métissage as "closely affiliated with a hermeneutic understanding of lived experience and historical consciousness."[43] The political character of Indigenous Métissage is accented when Donald notes that it "often cause readers and listeners to realize that things are not as they assumed them to be," prompting them to "to see themselves implicated in the stories told – and make critical connections to teaching, learning, and public policy issues today."[44]

Returning to his methodological point, Donald reminds researchers that when they "come to view themselves as storytellers, they become conscious of the ways in which their autobiography influences how they make sense of their lives and experiences," but "they [also] realize that their personal stories cannot be easily differentiated from the larger research stories they wish to tell."[45] Donald recommends researchers move "beyond a singular preoccupation with identity to include the particular context from which a researcher addresses and interprets," noting that "who cannot be separated from where."[46] Even that expanded sense of identity is "always in a state of flux," and "openness creates the possibility that our sense of who can be transformed through encounters with difference."[47] This potential is, he continues (echoing a point Iseke makes above), "why story is so powerful to the human consciousness," adding: "We are drawn into a story by the desire to make meaning and transform our sense of who and where."[48] Summarizing, Donald writes:

> Doing Indigenous Métissage requires work with artifact, place, and context in the hope that a story will emerge that will need to be told. To weave this story requires a provocative juxtaposition of Aboriginal and Canadian standpoints to bring about a shift in the critical consciousness of writer and reader, storyteller and listener. Such relationality needs to happen in theory because it has not been perceived and appreciated in the daily interactions and practices of living together in this place we call Canada. It has been concealed by colonial frontier logics. We must first reread and reframe colonial constructs in order to see more

> clearly the language and logics that have clouded our thinking. Such theorizing will help deconstruct the colonial frontier logics of inside/outside and facilitate meaningful reconstruction through sustained engagements that traverse perceived civilizational divides. Only then will the stories linking Aboriginal peoples and Canadians revitalize relationships with a common sense of place.[49]

Were that it so.

COMMENTARY

In this theorization of Indigenous Métissage, Donald affirms that this research praxis (sensibility and method) is not for Indigenous peoples only, however grounded in particular places, as it interweaves contrasting narrative threads into a common experience of place, e.g. Canada. Its "purpose," Kiera Brant-Birioukov wrote (in a note to me), "is to not only re-story place, but to bring Settler Canadians into ethical relationships with Indigenous peoples through the de/re-construction of our collective histories, present relationships (or lack thereof) and future possibilities as Canadians who have a shared history of place." Iseke also emphasizes the centrality of Indigenous storytelling to Indigenous culture, specifying its significance for witnessing and remembering Indigenous traditions, affirming Indigenous selfhood. European and European-descent fiction and poetry also emphasize place and its formative relation to character, plot, and imagery; these literary arts have been celebrated within European cultures for centuries. Surely there is braiding to be done here.

REFERENCES

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Pinar, William F. 2019a. What Is Curriculum Theory? (3rd edition.) New York: Routledge.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Iseke 2013, 559.
[2] Iseke 2013, 559.
[3] Iseke 2013, 559.
[4] Iseke 2013, 559-560.
[5] Iseke 2013, 560.
[6] Iseke 2013, 560.
[7] Iseke 2013, 561.
[8] Iseke 2013, 564-565.
[9] Iseke 2013, 564-565.
[10] Iseke 2013, 564-565.
[11] Iseke 2013, 572-573.
[12] Iseke 2013, 572-573.
[13] Iseke 2013, 572-573.
[14] Iseke, 2013, 573.
[15] Iseke, 2013, 573.
[16] Iseke, 2013, 573. This implies – in my terminology – the story's allegorical significance: Pinar 2019a, 27.
[17] Donald 2012, 534.
[18] Donald 2012, 534.
[19] Donald 2012, 534.
[20] Donald 2012, 534. Repurposing would seem an instance of braiding (see research brief #2).
[21] Donald 2012, 534.
[22] Donald 2012, 534. Again, that "way" might well be "braiding," implicit in the concept of "métissage."
[23] Donald 2012, 534.
[24] Donald 2012, 536.
[25] Donald 2012, 536. In combining Plains Cree and Blackfoot traditions, linking "praxis" and "sensibility," emphasizing "Aboriginal and Canadian relations," Donald seems to be hybridizing *par excellence*.
[26] Donald 2012, 536.
[27] Donald 2012 537-538.
[28] Donald 2012 538.
[29] Donald 2012 541.
[30] Donald 2012 541.
[31] Donald 2012 541.
[32] Donald 2012 541.

[33] Donald 2012, 541-542. As readers note, Donald uses "Indigenous" and "Aboriginal" interchangeably.

[34] Donald 2012, 542. The word "people" would seem to refer to non-Aboriginal peoples.

[35] Donald 2012, 542.

[36] Donald 2012, 542.

[37] Pinar 2019b, 230.

[38] Donald 2012, 543.

[39] Donald 2012, 544.

[40] Donald 2012, 544. Again: that concept is associated with the work of Susan Dion (research brief #2).

[41] Donald 2012, 544.

[42] Quoted in Donald 2012, 54.

[43] Donald 2012, 54. There is no acknowledgement of the "Eurocentric" character of these concepts.

[44] Donald 2012, 547. Does the phrase "readers and listeners" refer to non-Aboriginal peoples only? I suspect so, but perhaps I am mistaken, and Donald is urging his Aboriginal listeners and readers to reevaluate their own sense of colonial histories and relations.

[45] Donald 2012, 548. Dion's concept of "braiding" is again affirmed. (see research brief #2)

[46] Donald 2012, 549.

[47] Donald 2012, 549.

[48] Donald 2012, 549.

[49] Donald 2012, 549.