



Book Review:
Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities:
Indigenizing the Academy

Joanne Tompkins
St. Francis Xavier University

Abstract:

Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy is intended to create discussions and describe actions that will challenge the colonial narrative and create more inclusive humanities. Aimed at both Indigenous and Settler educators, the beautifully edited book uses the metaphor of a basket to suggest the *weaving* of Mi'kmaw knowledge systems with Eurocentric knowledge systems, a weaving that is necessary to create a trans-systemic concept of the humanities that will ultimately decolonize and transform the academy. Visioning Mi'kmaw humanities can create the emergence of education systems which create pride, confidence, belonging and educational success for Indigenous students and teachers. This kind of education system will also benefit non-Indigenous students and teachers with the same gifts and lead to the reconciliation we so urgently seek.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge systems; decolonization; reconciliation; Mi'kmaw humanities

Recension

Résumé :

L'intention du livre *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy* est de créer un dialogue et décrire des actions qui défieront les narrations coloniales et créeront des humanités plus inclusives. Écrit pour les éducateurs autochtones et pour les éducateurs pionniers, ce volume, créé de main de maître, utilise la métaphore du panier en référence au tissage des systèmes de connaissances mi'kmaws et eurocentriques, un tissage nécessaire à la création d'une science humaine trans-systémique qui pourra éventuellement décoloniser et transformer les milieux universitaires. Envisager des humanités mi'kmaws pourra faire émerger des systèmes scolaires qui font place à la fierté, la confiance, l'appartenance et le succès éducatif pour les élèves et le personnel enseignant autochtones. Ce type de système scolaire fera également bénéficier les élèves et le personnel enseignant non-autochtones des mêmes avantages et mènera à la réconciliation ardemment recherchée.

Mots clés : systèmes de connaissances autochtones; décolonisation; réconciliation; humanités Mi'kmaws

Book Review

Battiste, M. (Ed.). (2016). *Visioning a Mi'kmaw humanities: Indigenizing the academy*.

Thomas Berry, philosopher, eco-theologian and author of *The Dream of the Earth* (2015), decried Western and Settler narratives that prioritized progress over planetary and social renewal. He felt a new story was needed:

It's all a question of story: We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story. (p. 4)

In her timely and beautifully edited book, *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy*, Dr. Marie Battiste has both revealed and described what can be the new story—Mi'kmaw humanities. Mi'kmaw humanities are, in fact, not new. They have been here as long as Mi'kmaw have walked Turtle Island; however, they have been dismissed, ignored, buried, or actively assaulted by the colonial agenda. They are a new story to many Canadians and it timely for this book to be released as Canadians are called by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report (2015) to act and engage in reconciliation.

The book was made possible through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Grant (SSHRC) which brought together Mi'kmaw Elders, educators, researchers, leaders and students from various parts of Mi'kma'ki to engage in a "respectful reencounter of indigenous and colonial knowledge systems" (Battiste, 2016, p. 330). The author provides an explanation of Mi'kmaw humanities and the book is devoted to understanding what the concept looks like in theory and in practice:

Mi'kmaw humanity emerged as story, as dialogue, as spiritual connection to land and place, to the Creator, and as relations not severed by time and place and history. [It] has deepened understanding of ecology and animal and plant connections from continuous experience within a particular place. (p. 331)

Mi'kmaw humanities provide a radically different paradigm through which to view the current ecological crisis and need for global awareness of diverse people by "reframing the human and the humanities to the Mi'kmaw consciousness and experience" (p. 7), and thus "is an attempt to merge Mi'kmaw knowledge systems with Eurocentric knowledge systems to create a trans-systemic concept of the humanities" (p. 7).

This book, primarily aimed at educators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, creates discussions and describes actions that will both challenge the colonial narrative and create more inclusive humanities. Visioning Mi'kmaw humanities can create the emergence of education systems which create pride, confidence, belonging and educational success for First Nations students and teachers. This kind of education system will also benefit non-Indigenous students and teachers with the same gifts. It will change the status quo, in which Indigenous peoples are too often viewed as "perfect strangers" (Dion, 2009) by their Settler neighbours. A fuller understanding of Settler-

Indigenous relations creates a culture that will allow learning, dialogue, engagement and action between Settler and Indigenous peoples.

There are 12 chapters in this edited book and a multiplicity of voices is one of the book's strengths. There are many voices in this collection. The voices of Mi'kmaw and First Nations scholars lay alongside those of Settler researchers. We hear Elders' voices and the voices of young Mi'kmaw students. The stories come from different parts of Mi'kma'ki and beyond, providing diverse geographic representation.

The first three chapters by Stephen Augustine, James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson and Margaret Robinson reveal Mi'kmaw humanities to the reader. These chapters are told using the voice of storytellers, which help the reader in accessing knowledge that is both ancient and deep. They are essential knowledges for beginning to grasp Mi'kmaw worldview. Sa'ke'j Henderson beautifully and vividly describes the first three levels of Mi'kmaw language and thought and there is much here for the reader to grapple with and ponder deeply. As a Settler and non-Mi'kmaw speaker, as I was reading these chapters, I felt I was going beneath the tip of the cultural iceberg and finding the deep understandings of Mi'kmaw epistemology and ontology articulated in a way that I have not encountered before. These chapters are to be read slowly and carefully, and perhaps several times, for they provide the foundations for understanding the rest of the book.

Chapter 4 is entitled "From Smug Settler to Ethical Ally: Humanizing the Humanist via Solidarity", and it is an account of Settler educator and researcher Len Findlay's journey from colonial arrogance to cultural humility into allyship. I highly recommend this chapter to Settler readers. It is disarmingly honest and unapologetic and provides to Settler educators a place for them to deeply consider their positionality as they engage in the reconciliation process.

Elder Marjorie Gould engages with Marie Battiste in a discussion about the aptness of basket-making as a metaphor for visioning the Mi'kmaw humanities in Chapter 5. This chapter has a wonderful dynamic as these two educators, whose life-long mission has been about decolonizing education, attempt to find a metaphor that captures the complexity of that process. Basket-making is culturally appropriate, highly visual and suggests the weaving together of discreet parts into a greater whole. I applaud Dr. Battiste and the authors for their ability to maintain a conversational and accessible style found in this book. As a teacher educator I can already envision using these texts in my own teaching.

Armed with some understanding of Mi'kmaw humanities, and a metaphor that captures the complexity of introducing Mi'kmaw Humanities into the academy, the reader can spend the remaining seven chapters encountering examples of how Indigenizing the academy is translated into action. As a teacher educator, who has participated in decolonizing agendas in both Nunavut and with Mi'kma'ki, I was delighted in the variety of perspectives offered in these seven chapters. In Chapter 6, Isobel Findlay, a faculty member in a School of Business, tells of her decolonizing journey "rethinking a model of what counts for knowledge and for remediating the Euro-Canadian curriculum and its unequal socioeconomic outcomes" (Battiste, 2016, p. 11). Marie Battiste explores

Mi'kmaw symbolic literacy in Chapter 7 through an examination of how it manifests itself in, for example, the wampum, pictographs and petroglyphs, and how it synthesizes Catholic teachings. In Chapter 8, Nancy Peters offers us a detailed account of her coming to Settler consciousness in Nova Scotia. Armed with this critical consciousness, she is then able to provide an in-depth and up-to-date examination of how and where Mi'kmaw people have been and are absent or found in the Nova Scotia School Curriculum in the last 150 years. Jennifer Tinkham, in Chapter 9, enters into conversations with two groups of Mi'kmaw secondary students, one from a band controlled school and the other in a provincial school. The students are astute observers of their teachers and they speak with eloquence about the role their teachers play, or do not play, in decolonizing the formal social studies curriculum. Decolonizing and transforming mathematics education is the focus on Chapter 10, in which Lisa Lunney Borden explains her personal journey from Settler unconsciousness to Settler critical consciousness in both her teaching career in a band-operated school and as a teacher educator and researcher. Jaimie Battiste, Mi'kmaw treaty education scholar and writer, provides, in Chapter 11, a highly timely and informative essay on how concepts of belonging, identity and citizenship are understood in Mi'kmaw humanities. Chapter 12 is entitled "Thinking Seven Generations Ahead: Mi'kmaq Language Resurgence in the Face of Settler Colonialism" and describes both the importance of the Mi'kmaw language to identity and consciousness, and the role of land as pedagogy in Mi'kmaw language resurgence. Ashley Julian, a Mi'kmaw graduate student, engages in conversations about language resurgence in three communities in Mi'kma'ki.

Having read these seven chapters, the reader can begin to imagine how the academy, which has so long been a bastion of Eurocentric humanities, might be indigenized. Mi'kmaw and Settler educators can imagine creating educational spaces that are more inclusive and accurate for Mi'kmaw and Settler students and teachers. Each chapter describes in detail the challenges that decolonizing brings with it, yet they are extremely hopeful and inspiring to read. Theory and practice are woven together "just right" so that educators can see that the vision of Mi'kmaw Humanities is within our collective reach.

The book concludes with an afterword by Marie Battiste in which she describes some of the collective work of over 30 years to have Mi'kmaw Humanities recognized by United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Government of Canada signed on to in 2007 and which the Grand Council of the Mi'kmaq adopted as part of its constitutional law in 2008.

From the point of view of a teacher educator and someone involved in providing professional learning for teachers in schools, three things excited me about this book. The first was the sheer amount of knowledge and experience about Mi'kmaw civilization that comprise the first third of the text. I learned a great deal about Mi'kmaw worldview. The second, as I have mentioned, is that this text is accessible to a wide audience. The concepts in the book are deep and dense, but the book is written in language that, I believe, has deliberately avoided being too jargon laden or academically exclusionary. Many readers will be able to access and make sense of this text. It will be a particularly accessible text for educators, both Mi'kmaw and Settler. The third is the edited and collaborative nature of this book. I enjoyed the multiplicity of voices and I felt there was great balance of Mi'kmaw

and Settler narratives, allowing both groups to see themselves in the Indigenizing project. As an edited book, I could easily see using discreet chapters for deep discussions in my education courses at the Bachelor, Masters and PhD level. This would be an excellent text to use for a book club with in-service teachers in schools. Marie Battiste has given us a book that can guide us in the work we are called to do to build the new story we seek. It is indeed a beautiful gift she has given us.

What is important to us is that these essays have been written about Mi'kmaw humanities so as to comprehend another version of humanity, maybe even yours. You [the reader] have choices and a responsibility, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission instructed us to act now so each of us can add to what the future and our legacy can bring. These essays and stories are thus gifted to you. (Battiste, 2016, p. 338)

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