THE CHALLENGE OF FIRST NATIONS HISTORY IN A COLONIAL WORLD

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon his research and personal experiences, Menzies documents the private and semi-private narratives of colonialism that makes teaching First Nations history and anthropology challenging.

As a university-based Indigenous scholar I have come to the position that teaching First Nations subjects to non-Indigenous students and with non-Indigenous colleagues is necessarily an act of anti-racist pedagogy. Hired to conduct research with and teach courses on northwest coast societies at UBC in 1996 I have found that the simple act of providing good, effective, and rigorous scholarship is not a sufficient pedagogical approach in the context of a colonial society.

My teaching and research practice has necessarily become a transformative practice: that is, the process of learning/teaching needs to involve real change, challenge, discomfort, and ultimately transformative experiences. To teach First Nations history and anthropology one must start from the position of an anti-racist anti-colonial pedagogy that aims to disrupt the dominant colonial narratives and practices.

This perspective emerges out of the complexities and contradictions of my life and work. I grew up the son of a fisherman in a world in which my aboriginal-eurocanadian ancestry was a social fact that shaped what and how I learned about the world around me. As an Indigenous academic I am acutely aware of the politics of race and ethnicity. I am also aware of the damaging legacy of colonialism[1] for First Nations people today – one very real aspect of it being the ways in which public education is provided and taught.[2]

In what follows I document a series of 'stories' told in the context of my work on commercial fishing boats in my home town of Prince Rupert. My goal here is to highlight and pull into the light of day the background narratives that pose a significant challenge to the teaching of First Nations history and anthropology.

A small gathering of men were relaxing in the quiet time between the end of work and heading up town or home for the night. Ed[3], a crewmember from an adjacent boat, joined our circle and began to talk about his exploits of the previous evening. He had spent most of his shore – time participating in a 20th year High School Reunion – by all accounts it had been a smashing success.

Ed is a respected member of the local fishing community, an accomplished storyteller and an effective public speaker (the public here being a group of predominantly Euro-Canadian fishermen). I had begun to tune out –I'd heard this story before – at least versions of it – drink, party and drink… . I had almost decided to leave when Ed's story took an unexpected turn away from the typical masculinist narrative line of drunken abandon.

"Jim had all this paint up at his place so we loaded it into my car and drove back downtown. Parked off third, took a look for the cops and then went to it."

"Doing what," I asked.

"Hey? What do you think we were doing?"

"Painting the town red," somebody said to a chorus of laughs.

"No," said Ed. "We were painting the town white. Yeah, we painted a bloody

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white cross-walk from the Belmont right into the Empress. Help all those drunken Indians make it across the street."

"But why is it so jagged? It's crooked."

"That's the beauty of it," said Ed.

"It's designed just right. Your Indian stumbles out of the bar, into the street. 'Hey look,' he says, 'a cross walk.' And he's right over into the other bar. First class."

The tragic irony of Ed's own drunkenness seemed to have escaped him in the recounting of his previous night's escapades. He plays up popular explanations of the so-called "Indian Problem." Yet his story is only one example in a multitude of narratives of colonialism in which the disparate threads of racial superiority and intolerance are wound. Ed's story is part of the day-to-day experience of social inequality felt by people of aboriginal descent.

Once, while working on the same boat as Ed he confronted me in a more direct and personal way. A couple decades my senior, Ed wanted to set me straight on the issue of First Nations land claims.

"So they say we took all their land away from them," Ed said. He was standing, feet planted firmly on the deck blocking my way past him off the deck. We'd been on deck for several hours and I wanted to have a cup of tea before our brief break from fishing ended.

Ed had other thoughts.

We had been talking about the new aboriginal fisheries strategy and the so-called disappearance of sockeye from the Fraser River in 1992. Ed wasn't willing to concede that First Nations' rights either existed or, if they did, should be respected. I was tired, we'd already been out six days and the trip did not look like it would be over soon. Standing there, clad in my heavy fishing gear, soaked through with sweat and salt spray, I wasn't particularly in the mood to argue the point.

"Okay, so the land was lost. But not the rights," I said. "Now it's time to make it right. Let's go in and get a cup of tea."

Fighting to keep our balance as the deck rolled and bucked under our feet, Ed continued on.

"Okay, let's say we took their land, hey? Just say we did. Okay add it up, how much did they loose? Tell me a number, any number. I'll double it. Put it here," he said putting his hand up level with his shoulder.

"Now," he says. "How much have we given them, hey?"

I knew what he was going to say. I had heard him tell this story several times before and as I waited for him to finish I looked around the work deck of the 60 foot fishboat and realized that with the exception of the skipper, the entire crew was listening and watching Ed's performance.

"I'll tell ya," he said.

"We gave 'em welfare and they don't got'ta pay taxes. We give'm free education. They don't got'ta buy a license, the government gives it to them free; no questions asked. Just keep on adden. I'll tell you when to stop. We pay for their houses, build their boats. They don't got'ta do a thing. Okay so you put it all there." He pointed to a spot next to his first imaginary pile.

"So they want to take the fish; they want a land claim. We'll give it to them. You know what? –they're gonna come up owing us hey. I'll tell ya this Charlie, they ain't gonna like it. But too fucken bad. They don't like it? I'll get out my gun and blow their effing heads off."

Ed's story came to an abrupt end: it was time to start working. The skipper had come down from his wheelhouse as Ed was finishing his story.

In the transition from the private to the public, these narratives are cleansed of their more offensive and violent rhetoric. Public representatives speak in carefully measured tones constantly reminding their audience that they are not racist, that they are not self-interested. But rather, they are proponents of the greater good, of democratic interests, and of individual rights.

We can see this in the public opposition that emerged in response to the Nisga'a Agreement in Principle (AIP). Writing in the Prince Rupert Daily News then Reform Party Member of Parliament for Skeena, Mike Scott, argued that the Nisga'a AIP (and by extension treaty settlement in general) is a "recipe for disaster [because], inherent in the AIP is the notion that communism can be successfully reinvented." Scott praised the Nisga'a for not engaging "in acts of obstruction, civil disobedience and even violence." He elided discussion of the content of the AIP (except to incorrectly label it as communist) and targeted the process instead. According to Scott:

> The Nisga'a AIP is anti-democratic to its very core. It ignores the basic principle of equality before the law, entrenching inequality as a major feature. It is the product of a grand vision held by social engineers who want to do good by righting historic wrongs without regard to history's lessons.

But what are history's lessons? Scott was certainly not responding to the history of colonialism in which aboriginal ownership and control over their territories and resources was gradually eroded and placed under the control of a colonial state. Scott's commentary is in fact part of a larger history of denial presented in the polished language of public discourse. Buried beneath his apparent concern with democracy, inequality and disaster are all the private conversations of men like Ed, the men who put Scott and others like him in positions of power.

Even though Scott does not explicitly use racist language and is careful to point out his own perceived persecution, his remarks need to be understood in the context of the stories told by Ed which form quiet, semi-private backdrop to Scott's particular view of Canada.

Ed's narrative is a European fantasy of the Indian: drunken, out of control, and need of the firm hand of the white man to demarcate, to paint the boundary lines of the Indian's life. Scott's column is also a fantasy of (re)placement. By invoking the quasi progressive language of individual rights, Scott denies the collective presence of the Nisga'a as a people. Rather, they are simply a group of displaced individual property owners who should be paid off. Together, these stories are part of a continued attempt to, as Ed says, "paint the town white."

An important part of my writing details the semi-private stories of Euro-Canadian men and the role their storytelling plays in the maintenance of colonial structures[4]. These are emotionally wrenching stories. They form the terrain around which and through any discussion of teaching First Nations education must pass.

It may seem that these stories are exceptions; even exaggeration. Sadly, they are not. I hear variations of these stories everyday. Students and colleagues speak of indigenous peoples as objects to be held up and examined. Well meaning teachers extol the virtues of ecological Indians to my children. All around misconceptions and half-truths abound.

The challenge for teaching First Nations history and anthropology is that it must challenge these colonial half-truths with an anti-racist pedagogy combined with effective scholarship. Simply relying upon a liberal ideology that 'good information will undermine poorly conceived ideas or misconceptions' does nothing to address the underlying racism of contemporary society. Effective teaching of First Nations history and anthropology must necessarily challenge the private and semi-private narratives of men and women like Ed who, even in the face of fact and logic, are unable to relinquish their privileged membership in a colonial society.

Endnotes

[1] Menzies, 2004: "First Nations, Inequality, and the Legacy of Colonialism." In James Curtis, Edward Grabb, and Neil Guppy (eds). *Social Inequality in Canada* (4th Edition). Toronto: Prentice-Hall, pp. 295-303.

[2] See, Paul Orlowski 2004: "*What's Ideology got to do with it? Race and Class Discourses in Social Studies Education*. Unpublished dissertation, UBC. Orlowski makes a strong case for a progressive social studies curriculum that is fully aware of the legacy of the racialized and class-based structures of BC society. Among other things, Orlowski points to the colour-blindness of contemporary social studies teachers who seem unable to appreciate the injuries of race or class in their students (pp. 191-193).

[3] With the exception of public figures, such as politicians, all names are psyudenoms to protect the anonymity of those quoted in this paper.

[4] See for example: Menzies, 1994 "Stories from Home: First Nations, Land Claims, and Euro-Canadians" *American Ethnologist* Vol. 21(4):776-791, and; Menzies, 1997 "Indian or White? Racial Identities in the British Columbian Fishing Industry" in Anthony Marcus (ed) **Anthropology for a Small Planet: Culture and Community in a Global Environment** St. James, New York: Brandywine Press, pp: 110-123.