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Finding Voice in Indigenous Decolonization Initiatives

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For centuries the indigenous population in North America has been marginalized and oppressed by colonial government efforts at assimilation, with the systematic destruction of indigenous knowledge, culture, religion, and identity. In the post-colonial era, efforts have shifted toward decolonization and the process of reclamation of traditional indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. For a population that has been oppressed for so long, there is a need to find a voice for the transference of traditional knowledge and culture; a safe medium for expressing the oral history of a people founded on oratory traditions. Opting to merge tradition with innovation in traditional knowledge transfer endeavours will assist in promoting creative outlets for finding the lost voices of indigenous traditional knowledge and culture.

Preservation and Reclamation of Traditional Knowledge

Those who have gotten away from the traditions may act as if they don't remember, but all of us know inside. Our memories are long, as long as the line of generations. The elders have always passed on this knowledge. We have been told to never forget. So we remember, and pass it on, too. With us there is no past, everything is now, and the only future is the generations to come. (Anonymous, as cited in Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 2005, p.69).

For several generations the colonial influence has tried to destroy these traditional teachings, in an effort to displace and assimilate the indigenous population (Brown & Hannis, 2012) into the colonial ideal. There has been resistance through the generations, to the systematic destruction of traditional indigenous knowledge, so that it has survived in the elders, passed on in the traditional oratory manner, including stories, dance, ceremonies, drama and song (Pease as

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cited in Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 2005). It is this fragmented knowledge, the traditional teachings from the traditional ceremonies, that decolonization efforts are trying to reclaim, though it is not enough to preserve them as one would a museum artifact. True reclamation of traditional indigenous knowledge occurs when the indigenous youth population knows its traditional knowledge, culture, religion and languages as well or better than it knows the collective colonial history and stories of its people.

The discourse on decolonization is two-fold; traditional indigenous knowledge transfer and self-governance. Scholars focus on indigenous self-governance as the important step in breaking away from colonial power structures (Alfred, 2009a; Prentice, 2013; Wilson, 2004); however, reclamation of lost knowledge, culture and identity is also of significance in healing the wounds opened through generations of colonial oppression, marginalization, and victimization:

The revaluing of our traditional knowledge has to begin in our own communities and among our own people, not only because we are the major holders of the knowledge and the major impetus for decolonization begins there, but also so that we can prevent that knowledge from being appropriated by the colonial system (Wilson, 2004, p.362).

Efforts to reclaim traditional knowledge must then be borne of the indigenous community itself, with every effort to incite the want and will to learn in all its membership. Is there a means of engaging the community in traditional knowledge transfer without the political undertones of self-governance pervading the discourse?

In the days prior to colonization, traditional indigenous knowledge was openly shared and celebrated between the generations, with initiations and ceremonies intended to teach the

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valuable life skills, traditions, history, and religion between the generations. Traditional knowledge acquisition was celebrated with tokens of industry or honour marks (Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 2005, p.85) for learning the traditional skills such as hide tanning and tent making. Most knowledge was shared by initiation rights and ceremonies, or storytelling, “kids learned a lot just through listening, watching, then doing” (Deernose as cited in Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 87). From the earliest stages of colonialism these traditional methods of knowledge transfer have been systematically destroyed, leaving behind the question of how to regain generations of lost knowledge.

Storytelling (Informal Learning)

Generations ago the storytelling duties would fall primarily to the elders; the grandmothers and grandfathers, who traditionally had less physical duties and responsibilities, therefore more time to pass on the ancient wisdom to the children of the community. With decolonization efforts that include such an intense focus on the politics of self-governance, much of the traditional knowledge becomes politicized and shaped in a way that is “selectively employing those aspects of their tradition that are appropriate to the present social, political, and economic realities” (Alfred, 2009a, p.105); considering this practice as ‘self-conscious traditionalism’. Within this ideology there is the possibility that some traditional knowledge will be forgotten, as it does not fit with modern decolonization practices and theories. How is a balance reached between the politics of decolonization and the preservation of traditional knowledge, culture and religion for future generations?

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Modern Alternatives

In the traditional practice of indigenous knowledge transfer, the oratory traditions of performance arts (song, dance, ceremony) were utilized as a medium to convey the traditional knowledge, skills, moralities, politics, and governance to the younger generations. It can be hypothesized then, that in the modern era, alternative forms of performance art should be explored as a viable option for the promotion of traditional knowledge transfer, namely spoken word poetry and rap music (Biggs-El, 2012). “Given the mode of expression and its emotionally volatile content the overwhelmingly minority and marginalized voices of hip-hop culture are often shunned” (Biggs-El, 2012, p.164), not unlike the indigenous voices in a colonial perspective; this makes this mode of information conveyance a truer form of communication within a culture that has primarily known similar marginalization for centuries.

Can traditional knowledge stand up to the pedagogies of modern performance arts? It can be argued that this form of artistic expression would lend itself well to the politicized decolonization campaigns of indigenous self-governance:

On a theoretical level, the enemy of our struggle is the noxious mix of monotheistic religiosity, liberal political theory, neoliberal capitalist economics and their supportive theories of racial superiority, and the false assumption of Euroamerican cultural superiority” (Alfred, 2009b, p. 103).

The hip-hop culture, “is a cultural-political tool that constructs the notion of human differences, particularly as these disparities pertain to race, class, and gender” (Biggs-El, 2012, p.165), which does fit with the indigenous struggle for the reclamation of lost identity, traditions, culture, reli-

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gion and knowledge through the regaining traditional means of governance; however for the reclamation of traditional knowledge, this type of performance art may not be the answer.

Traditional Knowledge Transfer

By studying the way traditional knowledge was transferred in the past, we may be able to ascertain the most probable way to facilitate traditional indigenous knowledge transfer in modern times, “my father went on talking to me in a low voice. That is how our people always talk to their children, so low and quiet, the child thinks he is dreaming. But he never forgets” (Chona, as cited in Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 2005, p.86). Understanding that much of the knowledge transfer occurred during childhood, in a soft spoken and dream-like manner, it would stand to reason that much of the traditional knowledge transfer would be better suited to a similar pedagogical approach, rather than to the harsh and controversial method of performance art known as rap music.

The alternative performance art based method of knowledge transfer may be more enticing to the younger generation, though it cannot possibly recreate the old stories and the old ways of deriving knowledge from the environment and from the experiences of the generations of old:

Often in summer I rise at daybreak and steal out to the corn fields, and as I hoe the corn I sing to it, as we did when I was young. No one cares for our corn songs now. Sometimes in the evening I sit, looking out on the big Missouri. The sun sets, and dusk steals over the water. In the shadows I seem again to see our Indian village, with smoke curling upward from the earth lodges, and in the river's roar I hear the yells of the warriors, and the laughter of the little children as of

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old. It is but an old woman's dream. Then I see but shadows and hear only the roar of the river, and tears come to my eyes. Our Indian life, I know, is gone forever (Waheenee as cited in Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 2005, p.106).

Where do corn songs fit in to the modern discourses of decolonization practices? Not in the ideology of scholars such as Alfred (2009a), with notions of 'self conscious traditionalism', that see no need for these ancient stories as they do not pertain to modern reservation political science. To preserve a culture in its entirety, there cannot be a selective choice of knowledge to transfer and knowledge to discard; we risk alienating the elders who are the keepers of the traditional knowledge (McGregor, 2004). The corn songs are part of the collective history and knowledge of the indigenous people, and to decide they are irrelevant because they hold no value in a modern political arena is just another method of marginalizing and oppressing a population that has already bore this wound in battle with colonialism.

Conclusion

How can both the struggle for indigenous traditional knowledge preservation and the struggle for indigenous self governance coexist without the loss of any of the collective history of the indigenous population? There has to be a commitment to the preservation of traditional knowledge in its entirety, before there can be a choice of selective knowledge transfer for the purpose of political and social reforms in the name of indigenous self-governance.

Finding a voice to facilitate traditional knowledge transfer is paramount. The oratory traditions of the indigenous peoples lends itself to a modern performance arts based platform for knowledge transfer; spoken word poetry and rap music. The argument exists that traditional

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knowledge should be transferred using traditional medium; however the modern alternatives do seem to lend themselves well to the controversial tones of self-conscious traditionalism used to support self-governance initiatives. It is, perhaps, not the medium that is most important, but that traditional knowledge is given the opportunity to be transferred to as much of the indigenous population as possible, so that all the stories and their individual significances are preserved for the future generations.

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