

Four Winds, Colonialism, and Gayatri Spivak: Toward a Critically (and Historically) Reflective Educative Practice

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Abstract

The Four Directions of the Indigenous Medicine Wheel are drawn upon in an inquiry of colonialism and its implications for educative and academic practice. In this endeavour, Gayatri Spivak's writings offer an account of the influence of colonial history upon the educative practice of the academy in its relationship, for example, with Indigenous peoples and communities.

Keywords: The Four Directions; Indigenous peoples; colonialism; the academy; educative practice; Spivak; Derrida



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Along the Wascana Lake trail near the First Nations University of Canada, one will find the Four Directions of the Medicine Wheel (see Appendix A).¹ In this short, critically reflective essay, I look to the Four Directions as a framework from which to examine my educative practice² while at the University of Regina, which has increasingly borrowed from Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding. In their entirety, each of these four orientations is uniquely reflective of an Indigenous point of view of four stages in life's journey, beginning in the East with the physical birth of our being, followed by the South of adolescence and the exploration of new experiences, the West of adulthood and its challenges, and finally, the North with its potential for wisdom and understanding (Battiste & Barman, 1995; National Indigenous Literary Association, 2012b).

I refer holistically to the Four Directions as seasonal “winds,” following the work of Marie Battiste (2000) who speaks of the winds of the West, North, East, and South representing distinct parts of a conversation on colonialism and its implications for the relationship of the academy (i.e., universities) with Indigenous peoples³ and communities. Similarly, Bruchac (1996) regards the winds in an educative (and spiritual) sense as “opening the wind . . . to hear and appreciate the sounds of the world around you” (p. 69). Through each of the Four Directions, or winds, I draw upon the scholarship of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who writes of the legacy of colonialism and its significance for educative and academic practices, with particular attention to their effects upon the disenfranchised (e.g., women, new immigrants, Indigenous cultures). Well known for her English translation of French philosopher Jacques Derrida's *De la Grammatologie* (1967), Spivak takes a critically informed view of colonialism and of what it means for the academy.

The West Wind: Epistemic Violence

In “Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision,” Battiste (2000) sets in motion a dialogue that begins respectfully in the West—an unconventional place for most Indigenous peoples, as the eastern direction, as she indicates, is generally considered the first step in the life journey of the Medicine Wheel. The West may serve, in this instance, however, as a suitable site for a critically reflective examination of educative and academic practices, given a colonial presence that may be expressed metaphorically as the autumn season, “the end of summer, and the precursor of winter,” that is reflective of the “coming of Western civilization (meaning western European), with its Western forms of education, to this continent” (Hampton, 1995, as cited in Battiste, 2000, p. xxiii). The west wind is representative of a colonial history that found its place on the Canadian prairie as part of an imperialist regime that spanned most of the 19th century up to World War I—known as the *pax Britannica* (i.e., “British peace”), an era marked by “the greatest extension of direct colonial rule in modern times” (Roberts, 1992, p. 764). In the West, then, I begin my exploration through Battiste's (2000) metaphoric mapping of colonialism that offers in essence a window of understanding into the long term and continued effects of the *pax Britannica*, particularly upon the academy as an educative body in its relationship, for example, with Indigenous peoples and communities.

The colonial story that found its way onto the Canadian prairie is part of a far-reaching historical narrative that took shape early on within a global context of trade and conquest. Granted Royal Charter in 1600, the East India Company controlled over half of the world's trade and a quarter of its population, singlehandedly ruled India while trading with virtually every corner of the globe (Wild, 1999). Subsequently, the Hudson's Bay Company was incorporated in 1670, also by Royal Charter, with the power "to establish and enforce laws, erect forts, as well as to have its own soldiers, maintain a navy and make peace—or war—with the Native peoples" (Andra-Warner, 2009, p. 31) of its North American domain. Historically, the Royal Charters served, in part, to position Britain as the preeminent global power of the 19th century.

The effect of this celebrated period of history upon the colonized is captured through Spivak's (1985) notion of an epistemic violence⁴ that underwrote the British presence in India, a legacy shared in common with British North America, or Canada, as we know it today. Violence, in its epistemic form, does not require the use of armies or physical coercion so much as the more subtle, or perhaps less obvious forms of violence that prompt others, as Levinas (1969, as cited in Young, 2004) once put it, "making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance" (p. 45). The violence of which Levinas speaks has prevailed upon the Indigenous peoples of this land to believe that their struggles and the poverty in which they continue to live are the direct result of their race (Battiste, 2000; Episkenew, 2009); this is violence in its most enduring and pernicious form.

The North Wind: Worlding of Worlds

The north wind is undeniably the refuge of winter. Hampton (1995) reminds us that, "The north demands that we understand survival; it teaches endurance and wisdom. Its lessons can be hard and it is not enough to be good, or smart. The north demands knowledge" (p. 33). The North offers a reflective space to understand, or to diagnose (Battiste, 2000), the "pathology of colonialism" (Episkenew, 2009) and its present effects.

As a way of understanding the pervasive influence of our colonial past (and present), I draw upon Spivak's (1990) provocative expression of worlding as a matter of imposing a textuality upon others; that is, "the worlding of a world on a supposedly unscribed territory . . . thinking basically of the imperialist project which had to assume that the earth that it territorialised was in fact previously unscribed" (p. 1). This raises the question of theory and its effects, particularly through Derrida, who "will not allow us to forget the fact that the production of theory is in fact a very important practice that is worlding the world in a certain way" (p. 7). In reference to the idea of worlding, or representation, Spivak (1990) argues for two meanings: On the one hand, representation is understood in the political sense, as a proxy; and on the other, representation is understood as a matter of "treading in another's shoes," as the saying goes. The difficulty, however, resides in conflating representation in a political sense, as proxy, with "an actual being-in-the-other's shoes" (Landry & Maclean, 1996, p. 6). The act and practice of representation becomes particularly problematic when "having (or claiming to have) and producing knowledge of other peoples reflects the desire of the knowing subject, if not to possess, then to tame and consume the other" (Kuokkanen, 2003, p. 269). bell

hooks (1990) expresses this domination of one upon the other as a relationship set within the contextual space of colonization:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk. (p. 343)

On a similar note, Robert Coles (2010) alludes to the act of writing about others through novelist George Orwell in his *The Road to Wigan Pier*. “‘I am doing this, and I am going to leave, and I’m going to write about this and I know it,’—meaning that he understands that he will get something for himself for his altruistic or high-minded interest in others” (p. 42). Thus, “the biting irony,” as Coles (2010) phrases it.

Dorothy Smith (as cited in Lemert, 2010) offers a comparable account of academic practice as a matter of rewriting the experiences of others. The question is raised of controlling the interpretation of those experiences:

Riding a train not long ago in Ontario I saw a family of Indians—woman, man, and three children—standing together on a spur above a river watching the train go by. I realized that I could tell this incident—the train, those five people seen on the other side of the glass—as it was, but that my description was built on my position and my interpretations. I have called them “Indians” and a family; I have said they were watching the train. My understanding has already subsumed theirs. Everything may be quite different for them. My description is privileged to stand as what actually happened because theirs is not heard in the context in which I may speak. . . . We may not rewrite the other’s world or impose upon it a conceptual framework that extracts from it what fits with ours. Their reality, their varieties of experience, must be an unconditional datum. It is the place from which inquiry begins. (pp. 396-397)

Taken further, however, Spivak (1990) looks to the problem in particular of history as script, and its uncritical acceptance, pointing out the need to learn “not only what is going on through language, through specific programmes of study, but also at the same time through a historical [italics in original] critique” (p. 62) of the inequalities and injustices accepted without question. Such a view is perhaps reminiscent of Maxine Greene (1977), who speaks of being “wide-awake,” as being critically aware of the underlying presuppositions governing educative practice. As Spivak suggests, this is the start of a much better practice (Landry & Maclean, 1996), particularly as a way toward understanding the pervasive, and often unnoticed, influence of a colonial past upon educating within the institutional space of the academy.

The East Wind: Unlearning Privilege

The east wind characteristically brings change as the wind of the spring season, a time of new starts and directions. As the direction of the rising sun, Battiste (2000) looks to the East as a matter of healing with respect to “the intellectual and practical challenges to current ways of pursuing humane relationships” (pp. xxiii-xxiv). Within this framework of change and potential transformation, I explore the concept of unlearning privilege, described by Spivak as “unlearning one’s learning” in order essentially to learn “how to behave as a subject of knowledge within the institution of neo-colonial learning” (Danius & Jonsson, 1993, pp. 24-25). How, then, is the academy as an educative institution implicated in its relationship with Indigenous communities?

The notion of “unlearning” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2013) as a matter of “discarding from one’s memory” or alternatively, to “rid oneself of (a habit, false information, etc.).” Spivak (2006) takes note in a more recent interview, however, of the unrealizable nature of truly unlearning privilege: “I mean, you can’t unlearn privilege. . . . You know this privilege has become millenary, how am I going to unlearn it?” The privileges of the western settlers of the Canadian Prairie, for example, may be attributed in part to the Southern Numbered Treaties⁵ of the late 19th century, which took within their scope vast territories that extended from northern Ontario west to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The decades following Canadian confederation witnessed a wave of settlers to the Canadian Prairie that signalled the demise of the fur trade and a new economy of timber, mining, and notably agriculture, tied together through the construction of the transcontinental railway. The new economy of western Canada required the lands of the First Nations, who were increasingly seen as holding back progress (Miller, 2009). Western settler privilege, and consequently, the marginalization of the Indigenous peoples of the Canadian Prairie, began in earnest through these Numbered Treaties that had secured peaceful access to the land and its resources.

How is such privilege unlearned when its historical origins may be long forgotten and even trivialized? Spivak (1990) refers to the importance within both educative and academic contexts of being able to listen to that other constituency, but adds that one must learn “to speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency . . . when it wants the other actually to be able to answer back” (p. 42). This implies a sense of mutuality; yet, as Disch (1996) suggests, there is a need to move beyond positionalities: “To visit, in other words, you must travel to a new location, leave behind what is familiar . . . permitting yourself to experience the disorientation that is necessary to understanding just how the world looks different to someone else” (p. 159). Koukennan (2003) takes a similar position, bringing to light Derrida’s concept of “hospitality,” characterized principally as “the need for critically examining our current assumptions and presuppositions, if only because there is really no other way ahead in building a hospitable academy and inscribing hospitality in its practice” (p. 270). Through hospitality, Derrida (2002) offers a different point of view toward the academy’s relationships with its others:

Hospitality therefore presupposes waiting, the horizon of awaiting and the preparation of welcoming . . . the opposite is also nevertheless true,

simultaneously and expressibly true: to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken . . . Hospitality—if there is any—must, would have to, open itself to an other that is not mine. (pp. 361, 363)

The notion of being hospitable, as illustrated here, speaks essentially of an “ethical relation . . . in which each learns from the other, [that] is not at all the same thing as wanting to speak for an oppressed constituency” (Landry & Maclean, 1996, p. 5). This view on learning and relationships is reminiscent of the Indigenous concept of “right relations” (Calliou, 1995) that may be characterized essentially as a “two-way conversation and non-exploitative learning” (Kapoor, 2004, p. 642) that may result from an examination of the ways in which historical events, such as the negotiations that preceded the Southern Numbered Treaties, and the Treaties themselves (see Morris, 1880/1991), have contributed to learned and taken-for-granted privileges. As an educator, I am reminded of the vital differences between being responsible for the learning of others, as the duty of the fitter self toward less fortunate others and the notion of learning from others (Landry & Maclean, 1996) as a demonstration of humility, of importance to an Indigenous worldview (Lightning, 1992).

The South Wind: Can Indigenous Epistemes Speak?

The summer wind of the South brings a vision of renewal (Battiste, 2000), in light of the legacy and continued intergenerational effects of colonial institutions such as the residential school system.⁶ Drawn from Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) early analysis of subalternity, Spivak (1999) describes the world of the subaltern, as “the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, Aboriginals, and the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (p. 269), and notably, for subaltern women, “those removed from lines of social mobility” (Spivak, 2004, p. 531). Spivak (1988) maintains, however, that while academics generally want to know about the subaltern, they are interested primarily in their own interpretations; hence, the question: *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

Spivak’s reply was that the subaltern cannot speak, at least not within the confines of a Eurocentric worldview; or as Young (2004) suggests, “It was never the case that the subaltern could not speak: rather that the dominant would not listen” (p. 5). Koukkanen (2007) raises a further question: “What do we need to learn to ensure that indigenous epistemes can speak—to be heard by others in ways that do not require translation into dominant epistemes?” (p. 157). Aligned closely with the notion of hospitality, the Indigenous “logic of the gift,” as observed through ceremonies such as potlatch and other gift-giving or give-back practices, is based on the premise that “gifts are not given primarily to ensure a counter-gift later on, but to actively acknowledge kinship and coexistence with the world” (Koukkanen, 2007, pp. 38-39). This sense of reciprocity, or mutuality, as found within Indigenous teachings in the work of Walter Lightning (1992) with Elder Louis Sunchild, for example, denotes the importance of gifting as the willingness to reciprocate socially, and epistemologically. The acknowledgement of Indigenous epistemes, says Koukkanen (2007), must take place within the present and not through token recognitions such as long forgotten artifacts:

Recognizing indigenous epistemes must involve more than simply paying occasional tribute to indigenous peoples and their land-centred practices or employing them as inspirational symbols without knowing and acting on the responsibilities set by the logic of the gift. . . . Such approaches would only romanticize and perpetuate stereotypes with regard to “traditional” versus “contemporary.” Neither gift practices nor the logic of the gift can be rendered as belonging only to archaic or traditional societies. All of us are contemporaries, although some of us have different ways of perceiving and relating to the world. (p. 161)

Hence, the fundamental question here is not so much a matter of whether Indigenous peoples through their epistemes, like the subaltern, can speak. The better question, perhaps, is whether educators as members of the academy are able in sincerity to join as equals in a truly contemporary sense with Indigenous communities in the spirit of hospitality (as Derrida suggests) in a conversation tempered by the need to “unlearn,” and further, to heal.

Epilogue: Between Alliance and Appropriation

The Four Directions of the Medicine Wheel offer a uniquely instructive perspective on life and learning. Following Battiste (2000), the Directions serve further as a way toward understanding colonialism and its legacy. Drawing upon the writing of Gayatri Spivak, I have examined (albeit briefly and speculatively) the legacy of colonialism with attention historically to the *pax Britannica*, as it unfolded throughout the 19th century as a global phenomenon with far-reaching effects upon the relationships of the Eurocentric (and western settler) with its others—the Indigenous, disenfranchised, and non-privileged. Spivak’s writing offers an introspective yet historically critical point of view especially for university-based educators as members of the academy with potential to reconceptualize their educative and academic practices in light of their relationships with Indigenous peoples and communities.

St Denis (2007), for example, speaks of the need for educators within the academy (whether Indigenous, or non-Indigenous) to form alliances in acknowledging the “common experience of colonization and racism” (p. 1087) in order to challenge racism and racialization in its present forms; yet this vision is not without problems. Haig-Brown (2010) raises the issue, for instance, of the appropriation, whether intended or not, of Indigenous epistemes and teachings, referring to the word “appropriate” (OED, 2013) through the French “*approprié*” to “render one’s own.” What happens exactly, queries Haig-Brown, when someone takes an idea from another culture, or episteme, and simply decides to “run with it?” Margery Fee’s (2000, as cited in Haig-Brown, 2010) words resonate, especially when one stops to consider the potential for the appropriation of Indigenous ways of knowing, whether intended, well meaning, or just plain careless.

Without a conversation with living First Nations people about what they think and feel about their writing, their culture, and their lives, the likelihood that we will have produced bad interpretations arises, as we make ourselves the experts, and them into the mute subjects of monologic expertise. (p. 944)

Spivak, I believe, would agree. Through relationships of learning (and unlearning), marked by the practice of hospitality (as Derrida puts it), or of the Indigenous practice of gift-giving, may educators as members of the academy begin to find their way toward a more critically, and historically, reflective educative practice.

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Endnotes

¹As part of a learning activity on the Four Directions of the Medicine Wheel, the National Indigenous Literary Association (2012a) offers the following explanation:

A Medicine Wheel is a circle divided into parts (usually four), which relate with and counterbalance one another to form a whole, and is often used to represent Aboriginal wisdom in North America. Medicine Wheels are not necessarily a tradition belonging to all Aboriginal peoples. However, many cultures have some variation of the Wheel, and the Traditional Knowledge and views of the various first peoples of North America are more compatible with the circle concept than with linear, European-based forms of thought. The Medicine Wheel represents and unites various aspects of the world, both seen and unseen, and emphasizes how all parts of the world and all levels of being are related and connected through a life force originating in the creation of the universe. Some wheels teach about the four cardinal directions, the seasons, times of day, or stages of life; others represent the races of people, animals, natural elements, aspects of being, and so on. All parts of the wheel are important, and depend on each other in the cycle of life; what affects one affects all, and the world cannot continue with missing parts. For this reason, the Medicine Wheel teaches that harmony, balance and respect for all parts are needed to sustain life. The centre of the Medicine Wheel symbolizes the self in balance, and the perspective of traditional philosophy. The central perspective is a neutral place where it is possible to develop a holistic vision and understanding of creation and the connections between all things.

²Educative practice, as focused on adult education including aspects of higher education (i.e., post-secondary education).

³References to terms such as “Indigenous,” “First Nation,” or “Indian” are meant to include all people of Aboriginal ancestry. Further reference is made to “Indigenous peoples,” as reflective of Indigenous peoples and communities in their plurality.

⁴Derrida (1972) maintains that binary hierarchies (e.g., white-black, man-woman, man-land) are always “violent.”

⁵ See Miller (2009) for a comprehensive account of the Indigenous treaties of Canada; also see Epp (2008) for a recent perspective on treaties and their implications, in particular, for western settlers of the Canadian Prairie.

⁶The residential schools were a network of boarding schools for the Indigenous peoples of Canada, including First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples, that were funded by the Canadian government’s Department of Indian Affairs, in operation following the passage of the Indian Act (1876) until the late twentieth century, and administrated principally by the Catholic and Anglican churches (Dickason & Newbigging, 2010). In 2007, the federal government of Canada agreed to compensate an estimated 80,000 recognized survivors of the residential school system. In addition to providing compensation to former students, the agreement also called for the establishment of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada with its mandate to learn about what happened in the residential schools, and further, to inform all Canadians about what happened in the schools by (a) preparing a complete historical record on the policies and operations of residential schools; (b) preparing a public report including recommendations to the parties of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement; and (c) establishing a national research centre as a lasting resource committed to the residential school legacy (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).

Appendix A



Lionel Peyachew, *The Four Directions* (2005)

Collection of the University of Regina.

Photo: University of Regina Photography Department

(Virtual Museum, 2009)