The Future of the Page

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and Andrew Taylor

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5 Print Culture and Decolonizing the University: Indigenizing the Page: Part 1

Marie Battiste

Indigenous peoples throughout the world have used a wide array of forms and systems of communicating or writing or remembering that have shown similarity in strands of symbolic designs, meaning, and function.[1] Early Indigenous literacy in America was largely symbolic and ideographic, reflecting a unified vision of knowledge and thought from one continent to another. A wide diversity of forms exists from the Tupi-Guarani's *Ayvu Rapyta* or Origin of Human Speech,[2] to the Yucatac-Mayan paper screenfolds,[3] to the Algonquian *Walam Olum* or Red Score,[4] Midewiwin or Grand Medicine scrolls,[5] and Mi'kmaw hieroglyphics;[6] these mutually intelligible ideological systems comprised a tribal encyclopedia capable of providing the true knowledge, heritage, and history of early America.[7] Modern social science researchers have tended to denigrate this knowledge or classified these systems as art, religion, or material culture, but not as literature, science, or knowledge. However, Indigenous peoples themselves are beginning to reconstruct their histories and knowledge and to find decolonizing strategies that reclaim and restore their knowledge and symbolic systems. As their efforts emerge in many forms, they offer new scholarship to educational institutions that may begin to dissipate the historic and continuing cognitive imperialism in modern education. The following pages seek to assist this process.

Early Euro-Christian travellers and missionaries destroyed, transformed, or simply ignored most Aboriginal literacies of America or created myths that supported their own ascendancy, holding to their Eurocentric biases favouring paged writing. Some of these myths are reflected in their ethnocentric belief that Indians were not capable of writing. In 1580 Montaigne spoke of the Tupi-Guarani of Brazil as 'so new and infantile, that he is yet to learn his A.B.C.'[8] When Europeans did encounter undeniable evidence of a literacy equivalent to their own, such as Toltec and Mayan paper books, they did their best to eradicate it as a threat to the teachings of the scriptures they

brought with them. European scriptures were silent about the American continent and its peoples, a fact immensely distressing to many thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This Scriptural vacuum and source of moral doubt was filled with the myth that the Native Americans were illiterate savages who 'only' possessed an oral tradition, a myth clearly designed to preserve the moral ascendancy and economic objectives of European knowledge. This mythic projection justified forcing natives to communicate through European languages and literacy. Today, English is the leading killer language, having amassed the greatest structural power and material resources that its number of speakers can be made to justify, at the expense of other languages.[9] Accordingly, only three of the seventy Aboriginal languages in Canada are predicted to survive the century, along with only 100 of the world's languages.

Ideographic and symbolic literacy has been an important foundation for Indigenous peoples. It is a system that interacts with and depends upon oral tradition. The Europeans' inability to understand ideographic symbolic literature and their belief in their own superiority were the sources for developing the myth of the illiterate savage. The importance of this myth was critical to the Europeans' own empire building and to their own interests. It dramatized the Christian world vision and justified the confiscation of tribal wealth. That the myth ignored centuries of Aboriginal literacies and denied human dignity and rights to the natives was unimportant compared to Canada's mythogenesis and colonial destiny.

The living and all-inclusive tradition of Algonkian symbolic literacy was barely noticed in European writing. Early travellers' reports emphasized the 'bestial' nature of natives and only grudgingly admitted them into the ranks of humanity. A few examples of recorded aboriginal literacy in North America nevertheless survive. In 1497, for example, John Cabot was intrigued by 'fallen trees bearing marks.'[10] In 1652 Father Gabriel Druilletes reported Algonkian Indians using coal for pen, bark for paper, and writing with new and peculiar characters. In 1653 Father Bressani reported Indians of New France using 'little sticks instead of books, which they sometimes mark with certain signs ... By the aid of these they can repeat the names of a hundred or more presents, the decisions adopted in councils and a thousand other particulars.'[11]

Yet despite such examples, the myth of the illiterate savage continued to dominate Europeans' assessment of Indian character. One missionary, Father Pierre Biard, offered the following account of the Mi'kmaw mind in 1616, illustrating the inherent contradictions of the myth:

> [The Indians] have rather a happy disposition, and a fair capacity for judging and valuing material and common things, deducing their reasons with great nicety, and always seasoning them with some pretty comparison. They have a

very good memory for material things, such as having seen you before, or the peculiarities of a place where they may have been, of what took place in their presence twenty or thirty years before, etc.; but to learn anything by heart – there's the rock: there is no way of getting a consecutive arrangement of words into their pates. [Y]ou will see these poor barbarians, notwithstanding their great lack of government, power, letters, art and riches, yet holding their head so high they greatly underrate us, regarding themselves as our superior.[12]

Oblivious to other forms of literacy and ways of knowing, Father Biard and other missionaries imposed their valuation of European literacies on conceptions of knowledge and knowing, a form of superiority underlying cognitive imperialism that continues to reverberate in modern forms. Rather than the sequential grapheme-phoneme relationship of roman alphabets, Aboriginal peoples had developed another form of knowing and cataloguing their knowledge that only recently has been more fully understood. This knowing and knowledge builds rather upon a holistic and implicit world of symbolic literacy and collective dialogue and communication with creation.

Aboriginal Literacy

To understand Aboriginal forms of literacy and their usage, it is important to consider the spiritual, practical, and public functions of symbolic literary traditions of the Aboriginal peoples: their pictographs, petroglyphs, notched sticks, ideographs, and wampum. Algonquian epistemology was derived from the immediate ecology, their experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and memory, including experiences shared with others, and from the spiritual world discovered in dreams, visions, and signs interpreted with the guidance of healers or elders. A holistic ideographic system is partial knowledge meant to interact with the oral traditions, invoking the memory, creativity, and logic of the people. Their most significant meanings quickly passed from family to family, and to succeeding generations through dialogue and appropriate rituals and legends. Through analogies or style, they model the harmony among humans and the environment. Knowledge is derived from the immediate environment through personal and tribal experience, and secondly from one's interaction with the spiritual world. Aboriginal ideographs thus catalogue essential knowledge of the two worlds in holistic, meaningful ideas or visions, and through the oral tradition and appropriate rituals succeeding generations transmitted the collective knowledge and heritage.

A Mi'kmaw story is illustrated in the petroglyph shown in fig. 5.1 with representations of Star Husband, Star Wife, and Crane. Two women wish to marry stars, and upon awakening, they find two star men beside them whom they take as their husbands. Soon the women discover they are in the sky. They are told they can return to earth but must obey certain instructions if

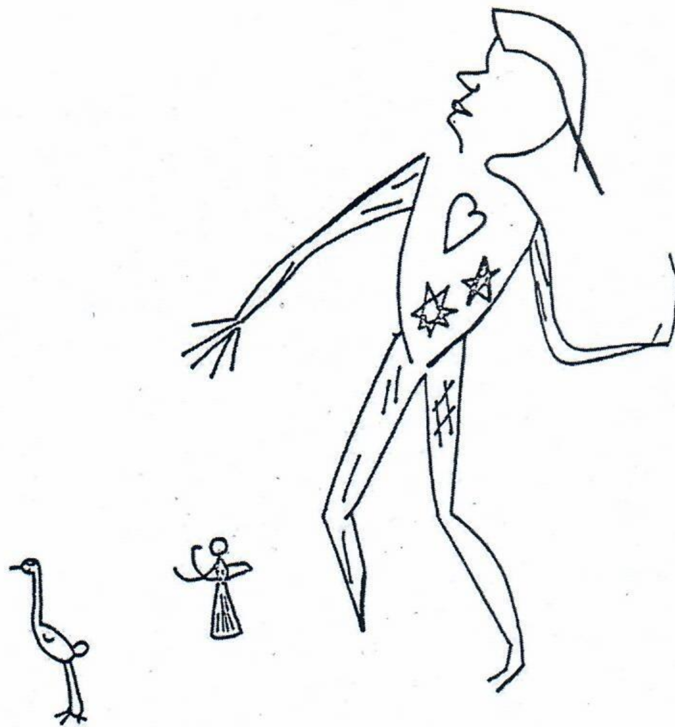

Figure 5.1. A Mi'kmaw story is illustrated in this petroglyph with representations of Star Husband, Star Wife, and Crane, from Robertson, *Rock Drawings*, fig. 3.

they are to reach earth safely. Unfortunately, they disobey and find themselves stuck in the branches of a tall pine tree. The Badger helps them out of the tree and the Crane helps them cross the river.[13]

These ideographic systems maintained a basic cognitive unity and balance, allowing Indigenous peoples to explore universal ideals that lay beyond the grasp of their empirical environment. Some symbols were practical representations of ideals, events, and time. Most symbols were never precisely defined or fully explained, since their purpose was to stimulate a dialogue rather than resolve the paradoxes of life concretely. They represented ideals that were infinite, dialectical (or relational), and indivisible so that any one person or generation could not adequately understand their significance.

The most common Algonkian ideographic text, recorded in patterned forms of wampum, appears to have served both public and private functions, not unlike the written text in European literate cultures. The word 'wampum' is both Mi'kmaq and Wabanaki in origin, derived from the word *wamponpeag*, which means 'white string of shell beads.'[14] However, variations of the word

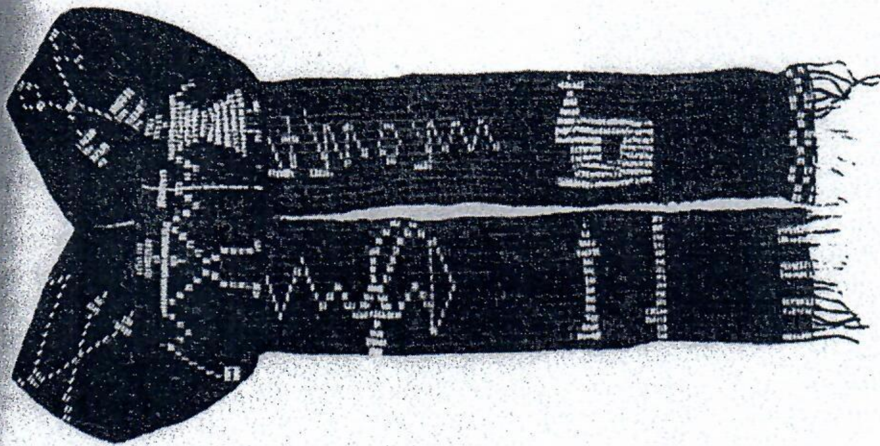

Figure 5.2. Wampum belt recording a 1610 agreement with the Mi'kmaq made in present-day Nova Scotia, from Henderson, *Mi'kmaw Concordat*, 81.

exist among other tribes, but among the Wabanaki Confederacy, patterned wampum was figuratively called *gelusewa'ngan*, meaning 'speech.'[15] Patterned wampum was woven coloured beads made from coastal quahog shells that conveyed shared meaning, knowledge, and heritage, a weaving that converges intriguingly with the roots of *text* in *texere*. Patterned wampum strings and ideographic symbols on belts of tubular shells were the media for history and public records, maintained by a wampum keeper or tribal historian. Among the Mi'kmaq this person was called the 'putus.' The putus's role was to recall past events and announce new ones, including treaties, agreements, and compacts. The arrangement and colours of purple and white beads then conveyed intent or attitude: all white was joyous or ceremonial, while all purple signalled death or war. The wampum belt in fig. 5.2 was reported to have been kept by the Collegio di Propaganda Fide in Rome, recording a 1610 agreement with the Mi'kmaq made in present-day Nova Scotia.[16]

The ideographic symbols used on the wampum belts are characteristically derived from older pictographs and petroglyphs. Petroglyphic writings have been found throughout North America, attesting to their universal usage and similarities in design among Aboriginal nations. Petroglyphic writings have been found on bark records and trees as well as on the rocks that give them their name.[17] The drawings illustrate a period from ancient times up through European contact. The function of pictographs, whether on rocks, birch bark, skins, or other natural materials, has only been superficially studied with writers suggesting themes or possible connections in legends or historical

events. What is clear, however, is that the pictographic or symbolic representations were an interactive communication that served purposes similar to contemporary writing.

The interpretation of pictographs and petroglyphs requires an understanding of how Indians created ideas and meaning in their 'verb-based' language systems. The petroglyphs interacted with the oral traditions, which were a nexus of knowledge. A mark on a rock in nature's irregular 'page' not only represented an image but also was part of a lesson or a story or a ceremonial event. Without the oral teachings, most glyphs could not be deciphered as meaningful records. The glyphs did not fully stand for or suppress the oral but called it into being and/or were rendered meaningful by it. Current knowledge of cultural symbols and legendary events, processes, and figures has helped to interpret the focus of petroglyph drawings in which the action and story was implied by various marks around and on the character.[18]

The pictographs represent ecological knowledge, spirituality, geographic and cognitive maps, ideas, and events. Mi'kmaq portrayed the seasons of the year pictorially, differentiating the seasons by the natural changes they observed. Spring had come when buds on the trees appeared, when wild geese appeared, when the calves of moose had grown to a certain size in their mothers' bellies, and when the seals gave birth. Summer had come when the salmon were running up the river and when the wild geese shed their feathers. Autumn was observed by the waterfowls' 'return from the north to the south.' Winter was marked by the harsh cold and abundant snows, and the bears retiring until spring.[19] Another example of ecological knowledge is represented in a fan-shaped design that is said to represent the northern lights, called *wae-g-a-disk*,[20] a term that speaks to changing designs of light.

Mi'kmaq were particularly adept in making pictographic maps that portrayed their knowledge of the land and sea. Making maps and charting courses of travel with birch bark scrolls was a function of pictographic writing.[21] These drawings on bark charted travel routes and described family and common hunting territories; often they were left at places where the hunter turned off the path.[22] Ideographs pictorially express abstract ideas, and 'embody the representation of ideas by aid of certain analogies that the mind sees between the symbol and the idea attached to it.'[23] For example, the symbol of friendship among tribes was represented by hands clasped or by two hands with open palms approaching each other.

Pictographs also represented spiritual knowledge and traditions. Reading of the various signs and symbols was known to those who practised the rituals. Repetition and association served as the primary means of learning Aboriginal knowledge and heritage. But especially, the rituals associated with the figurative signs of Algonquian pictographs, petroglyphs, and notched sticks served more diversified uses. Like the Mesoamerican screenfolds, most described spiritual ideas and concrete experiences.[24] The designs explained

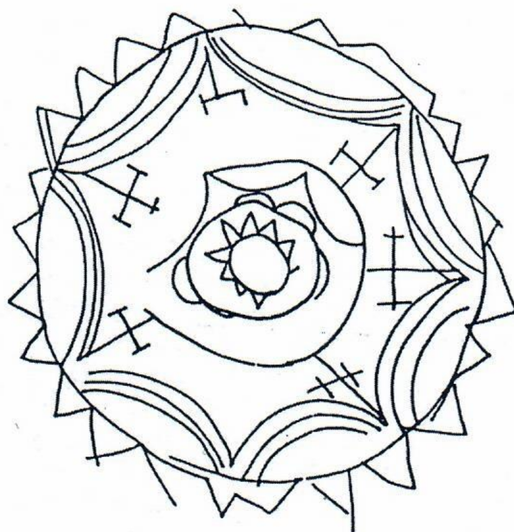

Figure 5.3. This ideographic symbol represents the seven districts of the Mi'kma'ki linked together in the circle with the cross being a significant feature of their relationships with one another, from Robertson, *Rock Drawings*, fig. 4.

cosmogony and were used to communicate with the spirit world and to recall individual visions and experiences among the spirits. As spiritual intermediaries, medicine people helped their people achieve personal communion with the spirits. Prayer and revelation were analogous to the traditional vision quest.

In 1610 this traditional symbolic tradition was incorporated ceremoniously into the agreement or concordat with the Holy See, an event that included both a ceremonial exchange of sacred wampum and a Catholic ritual of initiation (the baptism) of the Grand Chief and his immediate family.[25] The Concordat established Mi'kmaw Catholicism within Mi'kma'ki, their national territory, and consistent with traditional respect accorded grandmothers in Mi'kmaw society and at the request of the Grand Council, the Holy Grandmother, St Anne, became the patron saint of the Mi'kmaq in 1630 (fig. 5.3).

From that time to 1762, Catholic priests lived and worked among Mi'kmaq, learning their language and forms of literacy. Around the middle of the seventeenth century, the elders and Father Christian Le Clerq transliterated the Catholic liturgy, rituals, and prayers into the Mi'kmaw symbolic 'formulary.'[26] Le Clerq was initially very surprised with Mi'kmaw facility in tenaciously grasping 'any association of word, fact, or simple idea with a written arbitrary symbol'(24). He wrote that Mi'kmaq have 'much readiness in

understanding this kind of writing and that they learn in a single day what they would never have been able to grasp in an entire week without the aid of these leaflets' (126). Once Catholic rituals had been transcribed as symbolic literature, using analogies with existing symbols, they diffused rapidly throughout the nation within the traditional social contexts. Father taught son, mother taught daughter, and children reinforced the skills among each other. Prayers were recorded in proper Catholic ritualistic order as charcoal designs on birch-bark books, which each family preserved in birch-bark boxes decorated with wampum and porcupine quill designs.[27]

In 1735 Father Pierre Antoine Maillard began a twenty-seven-year mission among Mi'kmaq, during which he expanded hieroglyphic literacy and contributed to the transition from ideographic literacy to roman script.[28] When Maillard became fluent in both the spoken Mi'kmaq and symbolic literacies, he recognized the power of holding the Mi'kmaq to ideographs and not introducing them to alphabetic literacy. After all, this was the eighteenth century and the printed page would prove in many respects revolutionary. If Mi'kmaq became literate in the roman script, this new-found literacy might otherwise strengthen their doubts about French motives, including the new religion in which they might discover further ideological inconsistencies.[29] Despite the fact that Maillard had developed a roman phonetic script for the Mi'kmaw language, which he used for his own linguistic studies, he chose to withhold any knowledge of it from the Mi'kmaq. In the traditions of the medicine people's specialized knowledge of reading and writing sacred symbols, Maillard encouraged catechists among elders and youth to learn the symbols, chants, and rituals, and the nature of the spirit world (fig. 5.4).

The spiritual foundation of Mi'kmaw literacy also paralleled Catholic doctrines. Both systems addressed universal concepts. Catholic teachings of a universal God and his lessons to man affirmed Aboriginal ideals. Thus Mi'kmaw spiritual culture was broadened, not altered, by Catholic theology. The Catholic teaching that humans were destined to eternal damnation unless they practised a Christian life involving faith, ritual, and sacrifice was analogous to tribal beliefs in which the necessity of living up to the great ideals of Mi'kmaw life through self-control was emphasized. Catholic doctrines of love of God and one's fellow man, and prayers for the dead to help them enter the spiritual world, and sacred symbols were all analogous to tribal beliefs and symbols. Mi'kmaw society embraced the two spiritual worlds as one, adding to rituals but not changing the ideological foundation.

Modern sequential literacy was derived from symbols. The early picture writing (pictograms), symbols, and ideograms first represented general and abstract ideas. At some point in European history, the Phoenician traders created an alphabet of symbols that represented individual sounds of speech, rather than ideas. Out of this notion grew the European alphabets and scripts. The Mi'kmaw literacy system and consciousness remain in ideographs and

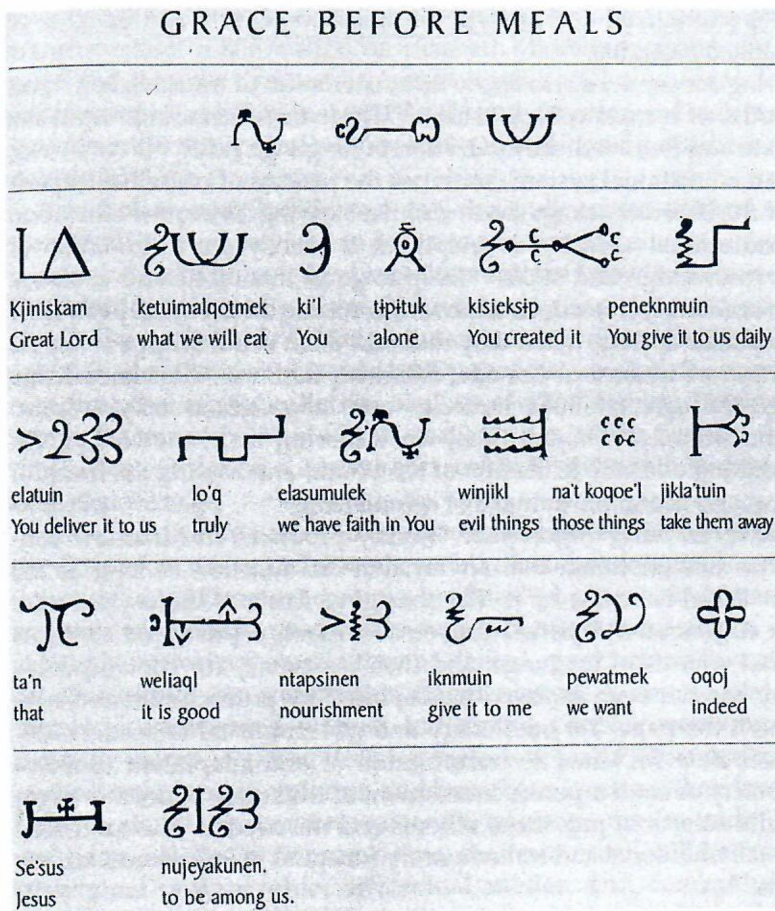

Figure 5.4. Mi'kmaw hieroglyphics, from Schmidt and Marshall, *Mi'kmaq Hieroglyphic Prayers*, 55.

not by default either. The modern sequential literacies of alphabetic systems imposed on the Mi'kmaq have supplemented their aboriginal world view, but their ideographic literacy continues to shape and define Mi'kmaw consciousness as do European-based linear scripts the consciousness of modern humanity. Modern literacy research has reconfigured presumptuous Eurocentric thinking about the dichotomization of language into the oral and written forms.[30] Furthermore, modern research has invalidated the dichotomized forms, finding that the two modes are superimposed and intertwined.[31] The difference between oral and written culture represents a difference in approach to knowledge and thought.[32] In oral cultures knowledge is embodied in a collective repository of received wisdom, acquired through shared experiences and interpersonal relationships. In written cultures knowledge is

seen as a depersonalized and analytic compilation of facts and insights of decontextualized thoughts.[33]

The differing conceptions also imply different modes of transmission[34] and different modes of human consciousness.[35] These understandings reject the older illiterate and literate dichotomization of language skills. Nevertheless, the Canadian educational system continues the process of cognitive imperialism under the illiterate savage myth and the banking concept of education in which educational capacity development is merely the assimilation of Eurocentric knowledge and skills.[36] Despite good intentions and textbook reforms, the seemingly innocuous textbooks continue the mythical portrait of Mi'kmaq and their society, when they mention them at all. Stripped of their wealth and power in eastern Canada, Mi'kmaq maintain their knowledge and heritage through symbolic literacies and language, as they are also becoming increasingly bilingual. They are restoring their knowledge and heritage by taking over the education of the youth, and healing the harmful psychological and economic damage of colonialism.[37]

The resiliency of early Algonquian literacy processes in Mi'kmaw consciousness has demonstrated that any system can function as long as the people value it and have use for it. The aboriginal forms of literacy served a function for Algonquian societies: universal symbols represented concepts and ideas, not sounds of language, and their legitimacy for contemporary tribal society has not been replaced or displaced by print culture and new technologies of the page. Yet missionary and governmental education continues to assimilate Mi'kmaq to transmission of and adaptation to Euro-Canadian society. A contemporary assessment of Mi'kmaw education urges both curricular reform in provincial schools and the need for the continued development of traditional and contemporary functions of literacy and knowledge systems.[38]

Much of the dialogue and discourse among educated Aboriginal educators and scholars in the last twenty-five years has focused attention on colonialism and oppression of peoples worldwide. It has been both a systemic and personalized process through education. We have been seeking an uncensored history that enables us to have a clear sense of our socio-historic reality from which we can heal.[39] Our journeys have led us to multiple ways to express ourselves and to give voice and imagery to our pain and anguish, our hopes and dreams, our strategies and alternatives, and our resistance and resilience. Many of us have come to realize that we do not have to be perceived through a Western lens to be legitimated. Yet we are all too aware that what is defined as knowledge for schools and curricula is not yet sufficiently comparable with Indigenous conceptualizations of knowledge, and that educational practice must continue to find ways to value the participation of Aboriginal peoples in educational discourse, policy, and practice, and in particular to identify and shape what is considered for school texts as

knowledge for those schools. Indigenous peoples must be actively part of the transformation of knowledge. As Elizabeth Minnick notes, it is not just knowledge and thought that need to be changed but also 'preconscious cultural assumptions and habits that are fraught with emotion and reflect not only the ignorance but the systemically created and reinforced prejudices of the dominant culture.'[40]

As scholars, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, unravel those prejudices, Indigenous peoples can begin to see that within their own traditions, within their own knowledge bases lies a store of knowledge from which they can rebuild, heal, and recover and restore healthy and connective relationships. They must acknowledge the colonial shadow through a thorough awareness of the socio-historic reality that has created the current context, accepting that a great collective soul wound has damaged their nations as a whole.[41] Once accepting of this fact, we can move beyond the personal dimension of blaming ourselves and seek to heal the nation with each significant step we take.

What is becoming clear to Indigenous educators is that any attempt to decolonize ourselves and actively resist colonial paradigms is a complex and daunting task. We cannot continue to allow Indigenous students to be given a fragmented existence in a curriculum that offers them only a distorted or shattered mirror; nor should they be denied an understanding of the historical context that has created that fragmentation. A postcolonial framework cannot be constructed without Indigenous peoples renewing and reconstructing the principles underlying their own world view, environment, languages, communication forms, and how these construct their humanity. That framework will no doubt resemble the page and use its traditional powers and protocols. But at the same time, the framework will be reconnected to Aboriginal oral, glyphic, artefactual modes, and conceptualizations of communication and it will be articulated with new information technologies. Finally, the fragmenting tendencies and universalizing pretensions of those technologies need to be effectively countered by renewed investment in holistic and sustainable ways of thinking, communicating, and acting together.

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