Being Indigenous

Commentary on Chandler

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I take seriously the honor of commenting on ideas put forth by Michael Chandler in his essay ‘On being indigenous: an essay on the hermeneutics of “cultural identity.”’ My intent herein is to offer personal reflections about the ways I read the essay, about the thoughts my readings evoked. In other words, this commentary is in personal dialogue with Chandler’s perspectives, a relational musing about the many ways to be, to think, and to think about being indigenous in the world.

My reflections on Chandler’s essay, then, are both personal and professional. In addition to being a mother of three (no longer that young me), and given my professional career in the area of indigenous early childhood education and public health, I often think about the importance of children in life cycles. As an indigenous woman of mixed blood who continues to come to understand what it means to be a Cree woman, and as a professional whose work is with children and families, I care deeply about our children’s identity (and that of all children) and the survival of our nations in the face of ongoing accelerated change. My work is influenced and informed by years of education in Euro-Western academies and by the teachings of elders from diverse nations. My commentary draws from all of this experience.

I thus begin my reflections with an anecdote captured by Cree elder Eddie Bellose, an anecdote that highlights the continuity of life and our role as adults within that circle:

‘Grandfather, what is the purpose of life?’

After a long time in thought, the old man looked up and said:

‘Grandson, children are the purpose of life. We were once children and someone cared for us, now it is our time to care.’

Central to the concept of caring, and to centering children as the purpose of living and life, is a recognition of the sacredness of identity and the responsibility and work involved in passing cultural knowledge across generations. This is, of course, not easy or straightforward, which is neither a new concept for indigenous peoples nor a concept unexamined by indigenous scholars. For instance, recognizing the complexity of what constitutes indigeness, Weaver [2001] quoting Peroff [1997] states:

Indianness means different things to different people ... Indianness is something only experienced by people who are Indians. It is how Indians think about themselves and is internal, intangible, and metaphysical. From this perspective, studying Indianness is like trying to study the innermost mysteries of the mind itself. [Peroff, 1997, as cited in Weaver, 2001, p. 487]

With this caution in mind, I begin not only the journey of dialoguing with Chandler's work, but also the journey of living my own life. I believe these journeys are both integral to the survival of indigenous peoples, particularly because at the heart of Chandler's work are questions about transmitting to our children ways of orienting to and being in the world. This, in itself, is a form of resistance to a colonial reality of marginalization and oppression that continues to be experienced by many indigenous peoples, myself included. What Chandler is theorizing about, then, I am living. So are my children. My reflections begin with general musings about the nature of indigenous knowledge(s) as a cornerstone to indigenous identity. This is followed by a discussion about interrupted epistemologies and ontologies. Finally, I return to the discussion about how Chandler's work interfaces with my lived realities.

Indigenous Knowledge(s): Being in Relationship

Wilson [2008] describes ontology as a process of being in relationship with other things in the world. It is not about *knowing the things*, but about knowing things by being in relationship with them. Ontology, then, is the act of *being in relationship* (p. 146). This is the *being* component of indigenous ways of knowing and being. The *knowing* part of indigenous ways of knowing and being encapsulates what epistemology is taken to be. In explaining indigenous epistemology, Wilson [2008] writes:

Indigenous epistemology has systems of knowledge built upon relationships between things rather than on the things themselves ... These relationships are with the cosmos around us, as well as with concepts, that form the key to indigenous epistemology ... (p. 141)

Relationship is at the core of indigenous knowledge(s) [Archibald, 2008; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Cajete, 1999; Castellano, 2000; Cohen, 2001; Ermine, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Holmes, 2000; Kawagley, 1995; Little Bear, 2000; Williamson, 2000; Wilson, 2008]. Despite the utter centrality of relationships to indigenous ways of being in the world, relationship remains a mutable concept, always geographically and contextually expressed and as diverse as the environments in which it, and associated knowledge(s), is rooted. Aboriginal holy people and philosophers believe that all existence is connected. Ermine [1995] writes that 'those who seek to understand the

reality of existence and harmony with the environment by looking inward have a different incorporeal knowledge paradigm' (p. 103) from those who seek to examine the physical world objectively. He says that the former way of knowing, which he links to indigenouness, 'is grounded in the self, the spirit, and the unknown' (p. 108), and that by introspection and self-actualization are we able to connect with a life force that is manifested in all existence (p. 104). Williamson [2000] writes that all organisms on earth are evidence of these life forces, and are perceived into existence through a process of self-actualization (p. 132). This place of manifested actualization is a place of creativity, which reveals the relationship between inner and outer realities. Cree scholar Couture [1991] summarizes self-actualization, stating that:

... reality is experienced by entering deeply into the inner being of the mind, and not by attempting to break through the outer world to a beyond. This positions the Native person in communion with the living reality of all things. His communion is his experience of the ideas within, concentric with reality without. Thus to 'know,' to cognize, is experiential, direct knowing. (p. 280)

Experience as knowing is often considered subjective. As such, and particularly within a world paradigm in which objectivity has ascended as a *better* way of knowing and orienting to life's questions, the personal experiencing of relationships has less credibility than more objective evidence. Knowing in a relational way moves beyond the physical senses and draws upon multiple ways of being and coming to know about one's being. Phrases like 'I feel it in my bones' or 'I feel like I am home,' both of which are commonly uttered in the indigenous homes and communities in which I so often find myself, are expressions of knowing that are not bounded by objective evidence. These utterances instead gesture towards alternate ways of coming to know how and why we exist in the world, including feeling and intuition. Often these expressions are better articulated in traditional languages and the arts rather than through the English (or other colonial/nonindigenous) language(s), yet as indigenous peoples we find ourselves in realities that demand expressions in knowledge systems different from the systems in which concepts originate. One of my colleagues uses the metaphor 'hollering across the cultural divide' to denote diverse cultural systems across which we try to communicate.

I best understand the concept of relationship, particularly the relationship between ontology and epistemology, by equating it to my experience of process and content that I undergo while listening to elders' stories. This begins when, as a listener, I enter into relationship (through hearing, feeling, imagining and reflecting) with the storyteller and story. Being in relationship with the storyteller is a process itself. Yet the very act of engaging with the content or product of the story is also a relationship wherein the story presented is defined by the process but also considered through content. The *knowing* part arises as I make sense of the spoken words, as feelings come to be in my mind and my heart. This understanding of knowing and being can be encapsulated in the words: *the content is process and the process is content*. In this way, to know is to experience knowledge in relationship: this is always unique to me, yet, as Little Bear [2000] would say, is still interpreted in and expands into the context of our socially constructed collectives.

At base, coming to know and to be is both individual and collective, both process and product, both internal and external, and originates in the energy of relational ex-

periences. Coming to know and be in this way demands harmony in our relationships, a constant realization about and effort to embody holism and connection with all that surrounds us. To this end, many of our stories and elders' teachings are about living our lives in a 'good way' by living our values (such as caring, sharing, strength, honesty, kindness, responsibility and respect) in order to achieve balance and harmony [Little Bear, 2000]. It is within this relational place that my cultural identity is anchored and from which it is passed to my sons and to those with whom I work and with whom I too am in relationship.

Disrupted Epistemologies and Ontologies

As environments change, so too do the people in those environments. Brown [2012], for instance, warns that no part of today's earth is unaltered by global warming and industrial pollution and that this irreversible change results from the activities of one species, us. Change is evidenced all around us in multiple ways. In very practical ways, where there were once robust food and medicinal plants, there are none, or those that remain are no longer useful. We have automobiles where we once had our feet or our horses; we have automatic washers and dryers where we once had rivers and lakes or scrub boards and wringer washers; we have internet and e-mail where we once relied on the telephone and fax. Indigenous peoples are as caught in these changes as other peoples. What nonindigenous peoples have *not* contended with, however, is colonialism from the receiving end.

Abrupt and rapid transformation occurred for indigenous peoples through colonization. Fundamentally, this colonial experience is an expression and exertion of one kind of power, perpetrated by one group of people, over another. Linked with imperialism, Eurocentrism is the cognitive legacy of colonization, described as 'artificial European thought, a differentiated consciousness ever changing in its creativity to justify the oppression and domination of contemporary indigenous peoples' [Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 58]. On a very personal note, as an indigenous woman, I listened just last year to a tour guide in London, England, 'describing' the Americas as still being colonies. Clearly a notion of Eurosuperiority survives and thrives. Many others have written about the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization and colonialism upon the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada [Miller, 1996; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Tobias, 1991]. In most colonized societies, the majority of the colonized are forced to live with their oppression and the poverty, ill health, addiction, abuse and discrimination – to do otherwise would trigger still further marginalization. This is not to say that resistance and strength are not everywhere, but it is to say that power imbalances still dominate indigenous and non-indigenous relationships. Oppression needs to be continually named and challenged.

Indigenous identities originating from relationships with specific geographic locales are particularly vulnerable to change. For example, we can look to the past to see this reality: as subsistence living changed to agricultural ways of living and as colonial realities replaced traditional ways of learning, direct connection to the environment changed. Organized structures, the written word, and formal schooling began to emerge at the expense of earlier ways of knowing and being. As environments change, it would be logical to assume that so would relationships and learning change. We cannot peel back the layers of change that have shaped and reshaped our environ-

ments and our identities, but, as indigenous peoples, we can look to the past to inform the future. These lessons of the past are embedded in indigenous knowledge(s) and are accessed through a variety of sources and processes that include traditional teachings (such as language, storytelling, ceremonies, arts, and symbols), revelation and empirical observation [Castellano, 2000].

My own experience of coming to understand who I am as an indigenous person was dominated by opportunities to listen to stories, to participate in ceremonies, to appreciate the arts and to be in communities. Listening to elders' stories allowed me to enter into relationships with the stories and storytellers, living and learning through both the stories and the elders who told them. I was also left with the task of interpreting what was said; the stories were not directive, but, as the listener in the relationship, it was my responsibility to contemplate their words in my reality. These mentors trusted my ability to find my own solutions and only offered me their teachings – many of which were anchored in the traditional ways – so that I could use the teachings to come to understand my current situation. In this way, traditional knowledge teachings remain applicable today. I am struck by the synergy of my experience with Rogoff's [2003] work on culture and children's development. In her book *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*, she argues that individuals develop and participate in shared activities and build upon the cultural practices of previous generations within the context of their communities. I too was learning the traditional teachings of my elders at the same time as I participated in a traditional process built upon mentorship and on centuries-old values and beliefs. This process and learning melded the past with the present and the future, reminding all in the relationship.

With this process of learning in mind, children's development of a sense of cultural being is critical to their individual development as well as to the continuity of their collective cultures and nations. This importance cannot be overstated when one considers the cultural and cognitive genocide experienced by colonized indigenous peoples along with the centrality of children to cultural continuity. Implementation of government policies designed to assimilate and eradicate Indian people in Canada struck at the cornerstone of Indian cultures and societies, the family, by removing the children. This was the pathway to destruction and will also be the pathway to construction of healthy nations.

Offering children opportunities to learn that are derived from their community and that engage with its members is an almost insurmountable challenge, particularly for marginalized indigenous peoples. While formalized early childhood programs may be offered in community settings, the programs themselves are not anchored in the same knowledge system as those of the indigenous community. This is evidenced in governance and policy structures that guide them such as provincial and territorial child care standards and regulations and by provincial, territorial and federal government program and funding policies, all of which are developed outside of the community. Likewise, early childhood training programs (offered in Canada and I suspect in many other countries) are not derived from indigenous ways of knowing and being but Euro-Western American worldviews. Even if the early childhood teachers are from the community and recognized as being community members by the community, their required training is not oriented to the same cultural knowledge system and results in dissonance at both the individual and structural levels in these formalized programs.

Programs for children situated in different systems of knowledge result in diverse cultural patterns supporting children's learning. Rogoff [2007] writes that:

... an important cultural pattern involves segregating children from the endeavors of their community and organizing them by tight age-grades. Children are excluded from many mature activities of their community and instead spend much of their time in age-segregated institutions such as schools and in specialized child-focused activities, to prepare them for later involvement in the full range of their community's activities. This contrasts with a distinct cultural pattern in which children engage alongside the other members of their community in the broad range of community endeavors, learning through keen attention, collaboration, and the support of others in shared ongoing endeavors. (p. 5)

In the latter example, and as E. Jones [pers. commun., 2012] has written, beyond a particular skill or knowledge, children consciously learn or intuit through unspoken relationships and the important words, images and activities shared with them. In most cultures the important words are in story form such as elder's stories, bible stories, ritual songs, folk tales, etc., and they become embedded in memory, frequently popping up from day to day. It is this learning in relationship with other(s) that is not always accounted for in formal programs that have set curriculums, time frames, indicators, and outcomes. The challenge then becomes finding how to orient whole programs and systems serving indigenous children so that the children's diverse communities and backgrounds are the backdrop within which the programs are situated and from which the children draw their 'lived experiences.' The challenge is great, yet the risk of not doing anything is even greater: continued family and community disruption and ultimately loss of rich and vibrant knowledge to all of humanity.

From a very practical place, tackling these challenges requires simultaneous focus on multiple aspects of the context of 'living.' For example, considerations at the structural level include taking into account the right of indigenous peoples to be self-determining – to determine their own life and that of their children. This right demands particular governance structures different from those currently existing in countries with colonial histories. There will be multiple visions of 'optimal health and well-being of children and families.' The heart of this diversity lies in *how* communities achieve health and well-being. Diversity is messy and hard to do yet rich in creativity and reward. Achieving unity in our intents for children, families and nations, however, does not mean uniformity.

Continuing to follow the lead of communities in the development of programs and policies that guide them becomes critical as those aspects direct and shape the relationships that occur for children in their learning and development. Policies that go beyond the child care field to collaborate with other sectors and to connect with the community in a 'real way' get to the task of addressing 'living' outside of set programs, standards and curricula. The role of 'early childhood teachers' is outside of the context of family and likewise vital to children's learning and development. I ask myself: what are the synergies between these settings, what are the differences, and what is it that we want children to know? Answers to these questions demand both individual and collective responses and are necessary to the settings in which our children find themselves.

There are many more pathways to travel when considering the complexity and multifaceted aspects of identity development and indigenous children. This brings up questions like how it is that children who live in urban locations away from their com-

munities develop their identity. How does it differ for those children who remain on reserve in their home communities? How does an indigenous child fostered out into a nonindigenous family come to know who she or he is as an indigenous person? As I contemplated these questions, and many more like them, I was reminded of the words of one of my elder teachers when I asked him how he could still go to church every Sunday when it was that very church that ran the residential school he attended from the time he was 5 years of age until he was 16 years old. He said: 'I take what is good, and I leave the rest behind.' There are many ways of knowing and being in the world; all have gifts to offer. In relationship, we share the gifts, taking what is good for us and leaving the rest behind. This kind of relationship radically changes with the introduction of 'power over.' Despite this reality, and as a marginalized person in my own homeland, I share gifts and take gifts offered to me in striving to achieve balance and harmony.

Closing Remarks

I return now to where I began, grateful for the opportunity to engage with the ideas and thoughts put forth by Michael Chandler in his essay 'On being indigenous: an essay on the hermeneutics of "cultural identity."' Thinking about identity offers unending possibilities and questions to explore, many of which will go unanswered. Highlighting the diverseness of humanity reveals the multiple arenas in which we find ourselves experiencing and learning, yielding a multitude of responses. Yet, in this diverse world, cultural identity is critical to individual and collective continuity – a continuity anchored in indigenous knowledge(s) of individual experiences of the world situated within a collective where experience both makes meaning and gives meaning. Children are not separate from their collective or its way of knowing and being in the world. More precisely, children's learning and experience is at the heart of this process and, therefore, central to the continuity of cultures and nations. They are the repositories of past knowledge as well as active participants in making new knowledge as they live, experience and learn. Children are the purpose of life, and it is our time to care.

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