

# UNIVERSITIES' CULPABILITY, TEXTBOOKS' MISREPRESENTATION

Vera Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt ask three questions: (1) why do universities “perpetuate policies and practices that historically have produced abysmal results for First Nations students, when we have ample research and documentary evidence to indicate the availability of more appropriate and effective alternatives?” (2) why are universities “impervious to the existence of de facto forms of institutionalized discrimination”? and (3) what “obstacles” must be removed if First Nations students are to more meaningfully participate and complete university degree programs?<sup>1</sup> Consistent with their focus on institutional culpability – regarding that I’m reminded of Kuokkanen’s critique (research brief #4) - Kirkness and Barnhardt exonerate First Nations students: universities are to blame for student failure, and it is universities that must demonstrate their “instrumental value to First Nations students; that is, the programs and services that are offered must connect with the students’ own aspirations and cultural predispositions sufficiently to achieve a comfort level that will make the experience worth enduring.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, universities must address First Nations’ students “communal need for ‘capacity-building’ to advance themselves as a distinct and self-determining society, not just as individuals.”<sup>3</sup>

To so address this “communal need,” Kirkness and Barnhardt recommend that universities follow their “Four R’s” – “respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility,”<sup>4</sup> insisting that when First Nations students attend universities they suffer a “lack of respect, not just as individuals, but more fundamentally as a people,” and simply by entering a reality “substantially different from their own.”<sup>5</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt focus on universities dedication to “literate knowledge,” pointing out that for First Nations people, “knowledge” is both “traditional” and “oral,” characterized by a “holistic integration and internal consistency,” in contrast to what they summarize as “the compartmentalized world of bureaucratic institutions.”<sup>6</sup>

Kirkness and Barnhardt suggest that “survival” requires First Nations university students to acquire a “new form of consciousness that not only displaces, but often devalues their indigenous consciousness, and for many, this is a greater sacrifice than they are willing to make.”<sup>7</sup> Those who do leave before graduation are “branded” as “dropouts,” and those who remain are “torn between two worlds, leading to a further struggle within themselves to reconcile the cultural and psychic conflicts arising from competing values and aspirations.”<sup>8</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt call for the “institutional legitimation of indigenous knowledge and skills,” although they do allow that the university may “help students to appreciate and build upon their customary forms of consciousness and representation as they expand their understanding of the world in which they live.”<sup>9</sup> Recalling the title of Walter J. Ong’s famous study,<sup>10</sup> Kirkness and

Barnhardt underscore “orality and literacy,” asserting: “With the technological advances of video, television and film, our world has become a combined oral/literate/visual one,” a “combination” they imagine as having “exciting possibilities for First Nations because it is nearing the traditional holistic approach to teaching and learning which is needed to heal our people who have been adversely affected by history.”<sup>11</sup>

Like non-Indigenous progressive educators, Kirkness and Barnhardt complain about what they call the “conventional institutionalized roles of a university faculty member as the creator and dispenser of knowledge and expertise and the student as the passive recipient of that knowledge,” suggesting that scheme interferes with the “personalized ‘human’ relationships to which First Nations students are most likely to respond.”<sup>12</sup> Apparently endorsing classroom discussion – famously inaugurated at the University of Chicago by Joseph Schwab<sup>13</sup> – Kirkness and Barnhardt endorse “give-and-take between faculty and students,” which they are confident “opens up new levels of understanding for everyone.”<sup>14</sup> Anticipating the “culturally responsive pedagogy” associated with Geneva Gay<sup>15</sup> - Kirkness and Barnhardt tell us that “such reciprocity is achieved when the faculty member makes an effort to understand and build upon the cultural background of the students, and the students are able to gain access to the inner-workings of the culture (and the institution) to which they are being introduced.”<sup>16</sup> Contradicting the claim to preserve pre-modern Indigenous culture, Kirkness and Barnhardt predict that faculty and students who are engaged in such a reciprocal relationship are in a position to create a *new* kind of education, to formulate *new* paradigms or explanatory frameworks that help us establish a greater equilibrium and congruence between the literate view of the world and the reality we encounter when we step outside the walls of the ‘Ivory Tower’.”<sup>17</sup> Encouraging, Kirkness and Barnhardt allow, is a “burgeoning number of First Nations post-secondary/adult education initiatives, both within and outside existing institutions across the U.S. and Canada,”<sup>18</sup> enabling First Nations peoples to create a more “comprehensive definition of ‘education’ and reaffirming their right to respect and self-determination.”<sup>19</sup> Such education “respects them [First Nations people] for who they are, that is relevant to their view of the world, that offers reciprocity in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives.”<sup>20</sup>

An early critic of anti-Aboriginal prejudice, Kirkness cites a 1964 review of social studies textbooks that found that “ancient Indian religious beliefs” were not treated respectfully, harming Indigenous “children’s sense of racial dignity.”<sup>21</sup> During 1973-74, Kirkness herself participated in a textbook evaluation sponsored by the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, the report of which - entitled *The Shocking Truth about Indians in Text Books* (1974), - documented “bias by omission, by defamation, disparagement, and by cumulative implication” - “constantly creating the impression that only one group is responsible for positive developments” - and by lack of validity, by inertia, obliteration, disembodiment, and by lack of concreteness and

comprehensiveness.”<sup>22</sup> Terms applied to “Indians” were negative, to “Europeans” positive.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, “Indians, by far, receive the worst treatment in textbooks of any class of minority.”<sup>24</sup>

The ancestors of First Nations people, Kirkness reminds, developed their own forms of education, involving members of the community for whom teaching centered around “belief in the sacred, the Great Spirit,” dedicated to the “survival of the family and the community,” thereby focused on learning that knowledge “necessary for daily living,” a form, she notes, of “experiential learning.”<sup>25</sup> Education for “independence,” Kirkness asserts, “must begin with us, our people our communities”; she cites a 1972 policy - *Indian Control of Indian Education* – affirming “parental responsibility and local control.”<sup>26</sup> The “Children of the Earth School in Winnipeg has the right idea,” she suggests; “they have changed the 3 Rs to rediscovering (research), respect, and recovering the culture and traditions of our people.”<sup>27</sup> Kirkness offers “a 4<sup>th</sup> ‘R’, namely, rhetoric,”<sup>28</sup> but she admonishes Native peoples to “practice what we preach.”<sup>29</sup> How would “we” know? Kirkness proposes “five simple questions” to act as a rudder: (1) Where are we now? (2) How did we get to where we are? (3) Where do we want to go? (4) How will we get to where we want to go? (5) How will we know when we are there?<sup>30</sup> The answers, she suggests, “can be found within yourselves, within your own communities.”<sup>31</sup> Kirkness concludes: “Our independence education will be based on a marriage of the past and the present.”<sup>32</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

Consistent with their focus on institutional culpability, Kirkness and Barnhardt exonerate First Nations students. Given that universities are embedded in dominant cultures and hegemonic power, can Kirkness and Barnhardt be surprised that Indigenous students’ “survival” requires shedding Aboriginal cultures or, at least, mixing them with university cultures? Maybe only First Nations universities can contribute to the “capacity-building” (recall research brief #14) of First Nations students on their own cultural terms. While mainstream universities have pledged themselves to address these critiques,<sup>33</sup> it seems unlikely that curriculum reform will be as radical as *centering* Aboriginal knowledge (research brief #13) suggests. Textbooks today may not look like those Kirkness examined over four decades ago, but as the Indigenous scholarship shows, prejudice remains.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 96.
- <sup>2</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 99.
- <sup>3</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 100.
- <sup>4</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 100. One is reminded of William Doll's (1993, 174) postmodern curriculum theory, wherein he names 4 R's, a curriculum that is "rich, recursive, relational, and rigorous."
- <sup>5</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 100. Universities are intended to be distinctive, different from almost all students' families and local cultures; they are committed to cosmopolitanism, e.g. against parochialism.
- <sup>6</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 100-101.
- <sup>7</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 101.
- <sup>8</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 101.
- <sup>9</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 102.
- <sup>10</sup> See Ong 1982.
- <sup>11</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 103.
- <sup>12</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 103-104.
- <sup>13</sup> During the latter part of the [Robert] Hutchins [President of the University of Chicago 1929-1945] era," Levine (2007, 64) reports, "the College faculty experimented with a technique of instruction that differed from the lecture format which had dominated course work during the 1930s. They called this new technique the method of 'structured discussion' to distinguish it not only from 'shooting the breeze' but also from discussions in which students merely ask questions to clarify or to challenge something an instructor had said." One of the University of Chicago's great pedagogues—Joseph Schwab—would on occasion lecture but he embodied, according to Lee Shulman, the Socratic method (Levine 2007, 129–30). For more on Schwab, see Schwab 1978, Block 2004.
- <sup>14</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 104.
- <sup>15</sup> Gay 2010.
- <sup>16</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 104.
- <sup>17</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 105. Emphasis added. Probably this is an inadvertent invocation of capitalism's fetishizing of the "new." What is being affirmed is preservation of the old, the ancient, indeed, the timeless, despite Kirkness' pronouncement of a "marriage of past and the present." No doubt Kirkness' idea of "marriage" is the more realistic view.
- <sup>18</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 106.
- <sup>19</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 107.
- <sup>20</sup> Kirkness and Barnhardt 2016 (1991), 108.
- <sup>21</sup> Kirkness 1977, 596.

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<sup>22</sup> Kirkness 1977, 597.

<sup>23</sup> Kirkness 1977, 599. For details, see the graph on that page.

<sup>24</sup> Kirkness 1977, 600.

<sup>25</sup> Kirkness 1998, 10. That last phrase resonates with progressive education, affirming learning by doing, as Ravitch (2000, 59, emphasis added) explains: [John] Dewey's writings encouraged those who thought that education could be made into a science; those who wanted to create child-centered schools based on the interests of children rather than subject matter; those who believed that *learning by doing* was more valuable than learning from books; those who expected vocational and industrial education to train poor and minority children for their future jobs; and those who wanted the schools to serve as an instrument to improve society." Adult education in Georgian England, Ivor Goodson (1995, 33) reminds, "especially for the working classes, had featured 'respect for life experience in curriculum'."

<sup>26</sup> Kirkness 1998, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Kirkness 1998, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Kirkness 1998, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Kirkness 1998, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Kirkness 1998, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Kirkness 1998, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Kirkness 1998, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Porter (2017, June 21, A6) reports that the University of Saskatchewan is "leading the charge to become a kind of Reconciliation U," in 2016 requiring all 17 colleges and schools to include indigenous knowledge in their curricula. She noted that (at the time of her reporting) few new courses had been developed, and that critics complained of "redwash," asserting an almost absolute incommensurability between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge.