

## **Representation, Identity and the Discourse of Indigeneity**

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Terry Goldie frames his discussion of the image of the indigene in Australian, New Zealand, and Canadian literatures under Said's notion of representations and Foucault's notion of discourse. Though the image of the indigene may bear no resemblance to the reality of indigenous peoples and their cultures, the image has become a self-perpetuating representation, if not a 'real' representation, then a 'fake' re-presentation with real, discursive effects. It matters less whether these representations are true. It matters more as to what ideologies these representations uphold and maintain. These images, these texts, create not only knowledge but also the reality they appear to describe, which in time, produce a tradition, or a discourse, whose material presence or weight is really responsible for the production, and endless reproduction, of such one-dimensional images and texts.

Goldie also uses an interesting metaphor of the chessboard in his discussion of the image of the indigene. He describes the indigene as a semiotic pawn on a chess board under the control of a white sign maker, who can move these pawns within prescribed areas; and the board represents one field of discourse, that of British imperialism. This analogy may invite a simplistic reading of whites and indigenes as oppositional contenders, with the white pawns being the superior contenders, and the black pawns being the inferior ones. But Goldie also asks how we can read the good and bad representations of the indigene, how can we reconcile these ambivalent representations.

Sander Gilman offers an astute reading of this ambivalence: we can move from fearing and hating to glorifying and loving the Other because there is no real line between the self and the Other. Only an imaginary line must be drawn. And to avoid troubling this illusion of an absolute difference between self and other, this line must be as dynamic in its ability to change itself as the self (Goldie 11).

Really, the crux of Goldie's argument is as follows: this image of the indigene is worth analyzing not only for its stereotypical implications but also for its ability to reflect on the white culture in which it has been produced. Goldie argues that the image of the indigene, whether it is present or 'absent' in literary representations, reflects a desire on the part of the white sign maker, the white author, to engage in a process of indigenization, to become

indigenous, to belong and no longer be an alien to the land. According to Goldie, Fanon's thesis does not translate so easily in the image of the indigene.

Looking at the other and making the other feel as an object rather than a subject does not hold up when it is the white self who is already alien. Therefore, the white subject must go native to become native. Goldie then lists five aspects to this process of indigenization, five standard commodities (a term borrowed from Said): sex, violence, orality, mysticism, and the pre-historic. Sex and violence function as poles of attraction and repulsion in white commonwealth literatures. Characters are tempted by the dusky indigenous maiden and fear the demonic violence of the fiendish indigenous warrior (15). While the indigenous 'redskin' is repulsive for his association with the hostile wilderness and new, threatening land, the indigenous maiden is attractive for her association with the restorative pastoral and new, available land (15-16). Assumptions raised by the indigene's speaking, hence non-writing, state suggest that indigenes have completely different systems of understanding, different epistemes, and are based on an often undefined belief that cultures without writing operate within a different dimension of consciousness (16). As for mysticism, the image of the indigene in white commonwealth literatures tends to be a sign of oracular power: a malevolent power in most nineteenth-century texts and a beneficent power in most contemporary texts (16). Finally, as a standard commodity, the pre-historic refers to the indigene as an historical artifact, a remnant of a golden age that bears little connection to contemporary life (17). Hence the persistent discourse of the dying Indian culture and dying Indian race. In these representations, there is a tendency to see indigenous culture as true, pure, and static (17).

Margery Fee and Lynette Russell discuss issues of Aboriginality, whiteness, cultural hybridity, racism, and colonialism in the context of Canada and Australia in their collaborative essay. What I find most useful about their essay is their argument for equal dialogue to deal with the problems of Aboriginal-white relations: epistemological clashes, illusions of racelessness legitimating the apparent end of racism and colonialism, national apologies and reconciliations, cultural appropriation, and hybrid identities and genres that mix Aboriginal and white/Western identities and narrative genres.

According to Fee and Russell, essentialist thinking about whiteness and Aboriginality has obstructed understandings between Western and Aboriginal epistemologies. Fee and Russell suggest that we begin having more hybrid conversations in order to see how different worldviews might be usefully brought together. The problem with quick fix attempts such as national apologies and reconciliation commissions is that the conversation between the dominant group and Aboriginal peoples is only symbolic and short-term at best. What may be more useful are long-term conversations about how best to live together. And dealing with problems such as liberal guilt or the illusion of racelessness 'proving' that we have or that we should have moved past racism and colonialism long ago will require engaging (hence having

a conversation between equals) with Aboriginal proposals on how to deal with the problem of Aboriginal-white relations.

The central driving point behind Fee and Russell's essays pushes us to move beyond binaristic thinking. We need to move past binaries such as the racist colonizer and the assimilated Aboriginal that block understandings of hybrid relationships and hybrid genres of cultural production. For example, collaborations between white anthropology scholars and Aboriginal participants have received much criticism for risking a re-colonization of Aboriginal peoples (they are in a process of 'evolving' from oral to textual epistemologies); however, such critiques also run the risk of ignoring the agency, opinions, or pragmatic reasons of the Aboriginal participants for collaborating with white scholars. These critiques, ironically enough, risk removing Indigenous participants from the field of critical engagement: though it is necessary to remain cautious of the power imbalance in such relationships, we cannot disavow the possibility that a true conversation/collaboration might develop between whites and Aboriginal peoples. Such conversations/collaborations take on the process of understanding other ways of knowing the world, which requires unpacking the racial privileges that have blocked the way of understanding each other. As Fee and Russell put it, "Knowing begins with a conversation, the creation of 'an enunciative space,' a chance to explore the third space and move meaningfully beyond the black-white divide" (202).

## Works Cited:

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