

# Continuing Collaborative Knowledge Production: knowing when, where, how and why<sup>1</sup>

Celia Haig-Brown

Faculty of Education, York University, Canada

## Abstract

This paper questions assumptions about conducting research based in programs developed to serve communities which have traditionally had restricted access to the university. Grounded in an off-campus Master of Education initiative, it raises a number of ethical considerations. The questions addressed are as follows. (1) When does one move to doing research on a project which has been a satisfactory collaboration between a university and a community? (2) How is an academic to think about a collaborative project which will not, or perhaps cannot, become a site of research? (3) Where, in the space between community members' focus on the local/specific and an academic's focus on the global/theoretical, is it appropriate to share what has been learned? (4) Why should members of a First Nations/Aboriginal community (read any traditionally excluded group) participate in a piece of research destined for the world of academe?

The goal is to understand the situation you started out with better than before. (Stuart, in Crichlow, 1997)

This paper engages with four questions underpinning research which attempts to serve an agenda of social justice. The questions also serve as an introduction to some deeper issues around collaboration between universities and communities in potential research contexts. They are arranged around a site where the author, an academic who has been of use in a community/university partnership in program development, ponders the relationship between that work and the possibility of conducting formal research there. The questions arise from a perennial desire of progressive academics 'to be of use', in the words of poet Marge Piercy. Although Lather's (1986) notion of catalytic validity is a frequently cited extreme in its positing of the academic as the location of critical reflection and the resultant source of action, anthropologist Sol Tax (1964) has taken us years earlier to a place where he writes of applied and action anthropology. Foreshadowing aspects of what Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) calls coalition work, Tax, in his examination of 'The uses of anthropology', advises researchers striving for at least some accountability to the people with whom they are working to look to those people for guidance in the framing of research questions and the conduct of research that is to have relevance to the community. More recently critical ethnographers (Carspecken, 1996; Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Thomas, 1993) continue to refine ways to formulate useful qualitative research.

Richard Johnson's recently revived concept of 'really useful knowledge' (in Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 400) is one of the guiding principles of my work: I seek to be useful first to community members, then to policy-makers and preferably to people who will translate policies into programs. In each of my major research projects, I have started as a teacher/curriculum worker in the place, conducted research based in that work, and continue to interact with many of the people I have met and worked with there. Some have become friends and valued colleagues

whose insights continue to inform my scholarly work. Although I have occasionally played the part, I am not keen on being a distanced ‘tourist’ researcher. I want to work with people, in the place where we live, constantly moving between the place and the resulting documents, analysing together when the heat of the moment has passed and, most importantly, considering what we might pass on to others working in similar situations. This cycle has become my project.

The four questions raised here also have implications for the politics and practices of fieldwork conducted as part of critical ethnography. Thomas points to critical ethnography as ‘... a way of applying a subversive worldview to the conventional logic of cultural inquiry... The central premise is that one can be both scientific and critical, and that ethnographic description offers a powerful means of critiquing culture and *the role of research within it*’ (p. vii, my emphasis). Working in First Nations/Aboriginal<sup>2</sup> contexts, as a nonnative researcher (nonnative is a term of negation, its power lying in its ability to strategically exclude and its focus on what one is *not* rather than on what one *is*; the term also echoes many traditional languages in which any outsiders are seen to be somewhat less than human, i.e. not *the* people) engaged in continuing collaborative knowledge production, I find myself faced with ethical questions articulated in Trinh’s work. She writes: ‘The reflexive question is no longer *Who* am I? But *When, where, how* am I (so and so)?’ (1993, p. 157). When, where and how am I, a nonnative researcher—whatever that means—to continue a lifetime project of striving to conduct respectful (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996) and useful research with First Nations/Aboriginal people? And most importantly, why? Maori researcher Russell Bishop cogently writes:

Non-Maori people should be involved in Maori research for two reasons. The first reason is that there is a cohort of highly-skilled, professionally trained non-Maori who are becoming bicultural and are willing to work within Maori-controlled contexts ... The second reason why non-Maori researchers should be involved in this area of research is simply that for Pakeha researchers to leave it all to the Maori people is to abrogate their responsibilities as Treaty partners. (1996, pp. 17–18)

Walker writes ‘... the Maori as a minority ... cannot achieve justice or resolve their grievances without Pakeha support’ (in Bishop, p. 18). Surely the same holds true for relations between First Nations/Aboriginal peoples and nonnative Canadians. We nonnative researchers who work in contexts where our predecessors have violated trust, misrepresented, and declared reality for others seek such pearls of affirmation as we continue to work collaboratively in producing programs and knowledge. Although these comments might be assumed to assuage any fears a researcher has, such simplistic interpretation would be most dangerous: the relations are never without complexity. The bicultural dimension of our work across differences is never easy: cultural protocol and ethical behaviours must be central even as—especially as—they interfere with an academic’s business as usual. Only when a researcher takes the time to learn and honour cultural protocol can people begin to talk together. In the particular site in which I had been working, the questions arose as I contemplated my waxing and waning desire to document and analyse the work students and faculty did together.

The four questions then are these. (1) When does one move to doing research on a project which has been a satisfactory collaboration between a university and a community? While university seems somehow less difficult to define than community, for the purposes of this

consideration, community suggests that moment when people come together for a commonly defined purpose of some sort. Does that make the academic a community member? Does the process of doing research separate a researcher from the community? Is there a danger that participating in research may take a community member away from more important work at hand? (2) How is an academic to think about a collaborative project which demands her time and energy, but which will not, or perhaps *cannot*, become a site of research? As an academic, my success is measured in articles and books produced, not in programs mounted and communities satisfied. (3) The third question arises from the second, as it asks where, in the space between community members' focus on the everyday local and specific and an academic's focus on the global and theoretical, does one consider sharing what has been learned? (4) The final question is the most basic: why should a First Nations/Aboriginal community (read any traditionally excluded group) participate in a piece of research destined for the world of academe? Even research as critique, in the form of a reaction to conventional Western knowledge and research approaches, holds the danger of a re-inscription of colonization. As Jordan and Yeomans write of critical research,

... despite the innovations that these emergent approaches have pointed to, they have largely ignored or left unanalyzed the residual effects of colonialism on ethnographic practices in the contemporary period. (p. 390)

No matter how one struggles with Malinowski's now questionable concern with getting to the native's point of view, is the ultimate goal still to capture it in whatever form 'we' can and return with it to the 'civilized' world of academe where we—read Euro-Canadians—will make sense of it in ways that the people 'out there' do not have access to? 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', Audre Lorde tells us. Those tools in the hands of women who were never to touch them may be used in unanticipated ways. One hope I hold is that, as with the Trojan horse, what scholars bring back to the university from the community will affect us in ways that we can never anticipate. Within this dialectical exchange of what is or could become a productive form of reverse (and subtle) colonization lies what I sometimes see as a glimmer of hope for the future of knowledge production in academe. But before succumbing to a romantic salvation story of hope, I want to focus on the questions.

### **Question 1: When does one move to doing research on a project which has been a satisfactory collaboration between a university and a community?**

In order to address this question, I give you the specific context for my current deliberations. A few years ago I completed work with a group of masters students in a small northern city in the British Columbia, the westernmost province of Canada, 900 miles north of the main campus of what was then my university. This site serves as an exemplar of the major issues inherent in my work as a nonnative academic, first in teacher education and then in research, in First Nations/Aboriginal contexts over the past 20 years. Although the masters program was rife with complex issues and problematic twists for all involved, as a person committed to the responsiveness of critical pedagogy, I found it the most satisfying teaching experience of my life. There were days when I thought that I would like to conduct full-edged research with the people involved but it was not my program and the people there have their own agendas. They taught me that protocol dictated that when the program was talked about officially, the Tsimshian people, on whose territory it was situated, must be first and last to speak.

I am going to tell some stories from the program,<sup>3</sup> based in my limited understanding and only and always as a nonnative academic who worked with people there. I make no pretence of speaking for the people who designed and controlled this program. What I write is based in my memories of the time there and in some of the documents which I worked on as the masters of education program unfolded. Discussions with the university were initiated at the request of two First Nations people working in the area. One, of Tsimshian/Haida ancestry, has lived in the area for much of her lifetime; the other, a member of the Pomo Nation in California, was working in First Nations programming with the local school district. At the request of the community, the university where I was working has offered degree programs for First Nations students there three times during the last 18 years. As a result, in combination with graduates from other programs, there were a significant number of First Nations educators in the area ready for more formal education. The proposed masters program was seen to be part of a continuing effort to address the needs of the 47% of students in district schools who are of First Nations/Aboriginal ancestry. The two women worked with a colleague and me to establish a degree which focused on First Nations education. Because many of the teachers in the area are nonnative, the program was open to both First Nations/Aboriginal and non-native people. We began with 19 students of whom 11 were First Nations/Aboriginal women. Of the five people who left the program before the end, four were nonnative, and three were men.

At that time, masters degrees which culminated in a comprehensive examination had become available for interested groups of 15 or more students in a variety of off-campus locations. Such initiatives were responses to community interests as well as to the increasing encroachment of American universities charging very high tuition fees and, ironically in the context of the First Nations initiative which is the focus of this article, imperializing Canadian territory. The Masters in Education, Curriculum & Instruction: First Nations Education began in the fall of 1995 as one of these new initiatives. In addition to the standard university requirements for admission to graduate work, applicants had to submit support letters demonstrating at least 'three years of successful teaching, particularly with First Nations learners.' The program consisted of 40 credit hours of course work and a comprehensive exam which, during the program, was changed to portfolio assessment. Courses included: developing and implementing educational programs; race relations; First Nations history and culture of the area; traditional First Nations narrative; the political and social environment of education; a critical examination of the use of technology in curriculum; and First Nations law and education. Portfolio assessment conducted in the summer of 1997 included the presentation of a group developed resource book and video as well as individual materials. The selection and scheduling of courses, the assessment procedures and the choice of instructors all included student input. Tenured instructors, including one First Nations man from a neighbouring university, taught the courses. The one exception was a doctoral student, the only First Nations woman to teach in the program. In fall, winter and spring terms, courses were offered one at a time with professors flying in to teach Friday night and most of Saturday every two weeks. Adjustments to scheduling allowed for family time, report card time and major local events. In July, for the summer institute courses, the instructors stayed in town for the two-week duration. Although the second summer was to include time on campus, the students elected not to leave their community and to have their final course and assessment conducted on traditional territory. In a real and a symbolic way, the university came to the community.

This program and others like it offered away from campus often raise concerns about adequate scholarly resources. How can people pursue a masters program without a library? First there is restricted access to the on-campus library; in addition, there is a community college in the town which students can use. Far more importantly, the people in this program, both First Nations and nonnative, might argue that the resources that they have at hand—the traditional territory, the elders, the feast house, the extended family, and the treaty negotiation process—have much more to contribute to the work that they are doing than books which too often focus on Eurocentric communities, cultures, and accompanying analyses with little relevance, and frequently outright disrespect, to the people of this community. Over the years in First Nations/Aboriginal education, people have increasingly moved away from a reliance on mainstream curriculum materials to a focus on local and specific ways to address the diverse needs of the First Nations/Aboriginal students who historically have been badly done by in nonnative Canadian (read North American) educational institutions.

If one takes seriously the possibilities of a university to serve the needs of a First Nations/Aboriginal community, I would argue that this program is an exemplar in flexibility and responsiveness to student concerns. It is based on a commitment to community recognized by both students and professors, as well as on a commitment to a pedagogy of decolonization. The struggles of coalition work (Reagon, 1983) resonated through the program. White and First Nations faculty from three universities, First Nations educators, and white teachers from the community worked together across difference and pain and in many moments of joy and friendship to establish, deliver and refine a program which led to masters degrees and the deeper understandings which graduate work allows. By moving outside the university campus, by tailoring courses and the program to the specific needs and interests of the community involved, all people involved made it more than the usual offerings in curriculum and instruction. The curriculum for a special topics course offered as a summer institute was built directly around students' questions. Throughout the program, a continual shifting and refocusing of the courses offered attempted to meet students' refined and developing curiosities. Professors, in most cases, consulted with the students before finalizing course syllabi adjusting them accordingly. One major incident occurred resulting in the replacement of a white professor who would or could not adjust his teaching style to address fundamental issues of local protocol. The final portfolio assessment was conducted by three people, two professors and the chief of the local Tribal Council. The latter was selected, at the students' direction, both in recognition of protocol which calls for official involvement of the people on whose traditional land the program was located and because his expertise is related to First Nations education. In addition, students pointed out that he was not related to anyone in the program, something of an accomplishment in locale such as this one. It was possible—not easy, but possible—for the university to adjust in these ways. To do justice to this claim, of course, calls for systematic research rather than the musings I bring you here. This brings us to the second question.

**Question 2: How is an academic to think about a collaborative project which demands her time and energy, but which will not or perhaps *cannot* become a site of formal research?**

One of the major concerns of the students who were also the primary designers of the program was that it stay focused on the local concern of improving schools for First Nations/Aboriginal students: communicating with the outside world about it was secondary. A resource book developed out of the first summer institute is a prime example of the difficulties with

communicating results which arise when protocol is taken seriously. Students working individually or in pairs had taken responsibility for one topic in the course including developing a paper related to it. These topics, all of which incorporated appropriate cultural protocol in their delivery to the class, included: a day with a panel of elders from three surrounding nations; a field trip by boat to one of the villages; critical reflection in a local museum; an intense afternoon with a world-renown Tlingit artist; a land claims panel with negotiators from three adjoining nations; and time with a healer working in a nearby nation.

When we began to put the resource book together, major questions were raised about the audience for the book. I had visions of it serving other places as an example of the possibilities of a university trying to be responsive to local needs. The program serves as a model of what happens when a university takes current issues in First Nations/Aboriginal education seriously in building curriculum. These issues, such as land claims, treaty negotiations, First Nations art and philosophy, traditions, and the role of the museum are fundamental to the future education of all Canadian students. But that was my vision: to prepare something of this complexity for an audience other than the students themselves called for sensitive adherence to local protocol. To check with the people involved in the presentations as well as with the politicians involved in the weighty and consequential treaty process, the focus of one of the papers, was only an initial step. Eventually, the students gently insisted that, at this time, the audience for the resource book could be only themselves.

At another point, I thought the time had come to take the show on the road so to speak and with student approval submitted a proposal called 'Returning Home: Indigenous Control of a University' to a critical pedagogy conference. The proposal was accepted but, when the time came, community commitments took precedence. One of the prospective presenters was organizing the annual basketball tournament, a central community event when First Nations people from all over the province come together to represent their nations and/or cheer their teams on the basketball court. Players who have moved away are \_own home to play. It is a time of reunion: the competition and visiting are equally intense. When another student's father became ill, she could not see leaving her extended family at this time of crisis. In other words, for these students, the priorities are clear: the local community and their families take precedence. The maintenance and development of local First Nations culture is paramount. As an academic program contributes to and serves that project, it thrives. When it distracts from that project, the students either quietly or vehemently respond and get it back on track. At times like these, I hear the words of Cree scholar Dr Verna Kirkness years ago at a conference on First Nations education: 'Well, it's all for the kids, anyway'. All the talking, all the work and all the theorizing: if we lose sight of that, our work as scholars and educators can only suffer.

The answer to the first two questions about when and how the research might be conducted, then, was clearly, 'Not yet'. And I hear an anxious echo, 'Maybe not ever'. Interestingly, at least some proponents of critical ethnography have taken for granted that the outcome of work in and with communities will be communicated. Concern with the choice of publishing house may be expressed:

... socialist intellectuals must occupy some territory which is, without qualification, their own; their own journals, their own theoretical and practical centres: places where no one

works for grades or for tenure but for the transformation of society ... (Thompson, in Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 400)

But the question of timing and the fact that political strategizing may result in a decision not to communicate at all is not entertained. This dilemma leads us to the third question.

**Question 3: Where, in the space between community members' focus on the everyday local and specific and an academic's focus on the global and theoretical, is it appropriate to share what has been learned?**

When I see a program working in the way that this one was, I want to tell the world, to say look what a university can do with a few committed faculty and most importantly a group of students who know what they want and who articulate those wants in ways that cannot be ignored. At the same time, one of the things students announced clearly was that they wanted to focus on home and community and that anything that is said outside of that context must be said with the approval of the Tsimshian Nation whose members instigated and monitored the program along with First Nations/Aboriginal people from nearby nations and supportive nonnative people. As is now quite clear, telling others was not a priority; a focus on local development was.

I want to use the program—note the word ‘use’—as a basis for continuing theory work, building an understanding of how what happened here was distinct from most other university initiatives in its degree of local control. That is my priority, but it was not the priority of many of the people involved. How do I ask for permission to do this? How do they say a polite no to someone who has worked closely with them to keep the program on track and as responsive as possible to the concerns which developed? What if they feel indebted and so say a grudging yes to a research project? What if there is a danger to treaty negotiations somehow tied up in the reporting? What if the theory that I do build around the project is merely a continuation of war by other means, in Foucault's terms, where the imperialist project assumes another form—shape-shifter-like—and continues its devious work? Can or should I try to build an analysis which takes into account indigenous ways of knowing which guide the First Nations women in the program?

I have been formally working in First Nations/Aboriginal education for 20 years. As I have worked, I have had a strong concern about my presence there, constantly asking myself whether it is possible to serve a decolonization project or whether my white skin, my Anglo background, and my material privilege can serve only to re-colonize. ‘What nice credentials you have ...’ ‘The better to colonize you with, my dear ...’ In a recent review, Crichlow writes of ‘a drippy liberal notion like “bettering the oppressed and downtrodden” implying a naive, perhaps even arrogant notion of empowerment so trenchantly critiqued by Barry Troyna’ (1997, p. 7). While I hope I am self-aware enough to avoid such blatant maternalism, ultimately, within the constraints/comforts of seemingly endless, expanding global capitalism and the educational institutions which too often serve it, where is the distinction between the liberal and revolutionary? Are they not both concerned with projects of their own—whether it is utopia or some brand of a just society within capitalism—and not necessarily with the project of the place in which they find themselves?

In this regard, I need to acknowledge that the thinking for the First Nations masters program really came from two places—one was from the community in which the program was

eventually located and the other was from an administrator, not a faculty member, who was hired to work in developing more business for the Faculty of Education graduate programs. Basically his job was to make money for the faculty in these times of restructuring and reduced base budgets—first enough to pay his salary and then the ‘excess’ to serve program development. Profit from these initiatives is built euphemistically into the notion of ‘cost recovery’ degrees, a term which is becoming more familiar to academics and more lucrative for universities by the moment. While fundamentally mercenary, as are so many university initiatives these days, this one allowed for creativity within the cracks and junctures and the consequent development of some wonderful graduate programs. Faculty who worked with the administrator were able to build the money making into responses to local needs as well as some solid intellectual activity in the name of graduate study. It remains important to emphasize that the genesis of this program arose partially from budget restraints, and not solely or even primarily in the university’s altruistic commitment to First Nations/Aboriginal communities.

Writing about this project in all its complexities is *my* interest. As I have indicated above, it was certainly not the driving interest of the students. They were busy getting their courses done, keeping up their jobs and serving their communities and families, in the case of the First Nations students, in the maintenance, rejuvenation and continuing development of their cultures. How could a conference in Nebraska or Chicago contribute to these immediate concerns? And for me, the priorities are different. I want to tell the world, I want to open the Trojan horse in our midst in the hope of redressing the poverty of too many of academe’s knowledge production games. For too long, our understandings have been based in limited views of the world based in social Darwinist notions of European (read white) superiority. And this brings me to the final question. Is there a Trojan horse involved or am I contributing to more and better opportunities to (re)colonize? Is formal education an irredeemably Eurocentric institution or does it entail real possibilities of serving social justice?

**Question 4: Why should an First Nations/Aboriginal community (read any traditionally excluded group) participate with a nonnative researcher in a piece of research destined for the world of academe? (Even critique, in the form of a re/action against conventional Western knowledge, holds the danger of a re/inscription of colonization)**

Let me begin with two other story pieces, specifically, people talking to me about my work. An anonymous First Nations reviewer, despite his clear support of the publication of my ethnography of a First Nations controlled educational institution, commented thus:

Here is something about which Haig-Brown would agree I am sure: in the field of First Nations education, the importance of publication of the manuscript is not of equal importance to documenting First Nations discourse—in First Nations discourse terms—about education. The author is clear that the work is not intended to constitute a part of First Nations discourse. (Reviewer 1, p. 6)

This statement is a firm and clear reminder that I am a nonnative person working in First Nations/Aboriginal education. By what I read as a risky, strategic essentialist (Spivak, 1993) definition, it is clear that I cannot document nor even contribute directly to First Nations/Aboriginal discourse. A couple of years after this review, Roger Simon asked me to prepare a talk for the Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Studies series at the Ontario Institute for



Studies in Education which looked at the implications of Aboriginal epistemology for education. These two moments are jarring reminders to me. If I cannot even document First Nations/Aboriginal discourse, how can I possibly be in a position to comment on First Nations/Aboriginal epistemology for academic audiences, let alone be of any use to the First Nations/Aboriginal communities with whom I am working? Must my work only contribute to a discourse about, but not of or with, First Nations/Aboriginal people?

As the following indicates, I am not the only one struggling with the implications of producing such problematic discourses:

... the relation between anthropology and colonialism/imperialism has been the subject of critical examination by Asad (1973, 1986, 1994). Feuchtwang (1973), Kabbani (1986), and Said (1985, 1989, 1993). All four writers show that modern anthropology (particularly British and American) retains a theoretical perspective and conceptual framework that were shaped by colonial conquest and imperialism. (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 391)

Another example, this time of the theorizing I have done based in my fieldwork, demonstrates the problem of the imposition of even critical models in Aboriginal/First Nations contexts. Over the years, as I moved from fieldwork to the analysis of deskwork, I have been drawn to a consideration of power relations: in particular resistance, counter-hegemony and contradiction as they are evident in residential school accounts and in the process of First Nations/Aboriginal people taking control of education (e.g. Haig-Brown, 1988, 1995). In my work in the program described above and in researching my earlier work, I have come to see these analytic tools as a limited and limiting way to think about First Nations/Aboriginal education. For the purposes of this article I want to focus on resistance to exemplify my concerns.

Resistance is an extremely useful analytic tool because Western (read white, male, heterosexual, etc.) imperialism exists and is, in a sense, global in that it touches every country and nation of the world. Based in a materialist analysis, resistance has currency in a world dominated by capitalism. While focusing on the antagonistic relations between a subordinate and a dominant, it refers specifically to the ability of oppressed groups to refuse to comply with an overt or covert agenda of an oppressor and to maintain a separation, often an identifying one, between themselves and the one who would absorb or change them in ways that they find unacceptable. Ortner comments:

Once upon a time, resistance was a relatively unambiguous category, half of the seemingly simple binary, domination versus resistance. Domination was a relatively fixed and institutionalized form of power; resistance was essentially organized opposition to power institutionalized in this way ... even at its most ambiguous, [resistance] is a reasonably useful category, if only because it highlights the presence and the play of power in most forms of relationship and activity. (1995, pp. 174–175)

The countless examples of studies based in an analysis of resistance range from Paul Willis's lads (1977) and Angela McRobbie's young women (1991) to Harlow's study of resistance

literature in Third World liberation movements (1987) and more recent examinations such as Hale's (1994) publication on his work with the Miskitu Indians.

Increasing numbers of theoretical pieces are looking seriously at the shortcomings of and the need for refinements of the use of resistance as an analytic tool (see, for example, Brown, 1996; McFadden, 1995; Ortner, 1995; Sultana, 1989). In my case, a number of discussions with First Nations/Aboriginal colleagues have focused me on the limitations of an analysis located in conflict. As Ortner says '... as we attempt to push these people into the molds of our texts, they push back' resisting textual as well as political domination (1995, p. 189). Jo-ann Archibald, Director of University of British Columbia's First Nations House of Learning, and Grace Mirehouse, Administrator of Vancouver's Native Education Centre, are two people who have 'pushed back' in response to my analysis of aspects of First Nations/Aboriginal education. In particular, they have questioned my emphasis on conflict and power relations to the exclusion of a serious honouring of respect, reciprocity, and non-intervention. Ortner brings the complexity of this resistance to text: '[R]esistors are doing more than simply opposing domination, more than simply producing a virtually mechanical *re-action*' (p. 177).

I now see resistance as a concept which, unless used with the caution people like Ortner call for, re-inscribes imperialism and domination even as it names and critiques it. There are three main reasons for this. First, in its most accessible form, it is based in Western binaries which are culture specific and which reduce complexity in their constraining boundaries of either/or. Second, resistance immediately assumes a hierarchy in which one group supposedly dominates while the other is dominated (oppressor/oppressed; mainstream/marginalized; dominant/subordinate). This 'mainstream fiction' (Parmar, in Trinh, 1993, p. 157) makes far too simple the active and dynamic flow which makes up most people's lives. It also feeds the myth of Western domination as absolute. Finally, the work of resistance can detract from the work that people want to do within their communities as their gaze is drawn away from home to refocus on a so-called dominant power.

While it seems most apparent that resistance is a useful term for examining relations between groups, when used as the sole focus of analysis, it can constrain thinking. Fieldworkers who focus on resistance may be blinded to the rich possibilities of an analysis directed from the place rather than by an outside oppressor. Doing the work of resisting can also take time away from more fruitful and creative work. Feminist doctoral students in a university I know well are caught in a core course which insists on readings of Plato, Rousseau and other malestream philosophers. Each one finds herself in a rite of passage refuting the gender bias, distracted from the more serious work of building a feminist discourse as a real alternative rather than as a reaction to more 'acceptable' texts. Social activists in various movements are finding that resistance powerfully refocuses attention on a mythical dominant majority, inhibiting attention to the richness of cultural production as well as to the struggles and tensions within. Michael F. Brown takes up the limitations that resistance has brought to his own analysis. He builds on Sherry Ortner's concern that 'an overemphasis on domination and conflict would overwhelm the other face of social life, co-operation and reciprocation'. His agenda in the critique is to 'needle the pretensions of the privileged', presumably including his own, those who find resistance everywhere they look, use it indiscriminately, thus 'undermining its analytic utility' (1996, p. 730). Brown recounts his own work with a colleague and the resultant analysis, claiming that

‘we let our concern with multiple layers of resistance blind us to certain features of the story that are potentially of great interest’ (p. 731).

Theoretical blinders such as this one are central concerns that First Nations/Aboriginal friends, colleagues, and students have expressed to me about the limitations of an analysis based in conflict and the binaries which typically accompany it. Their daily focus as educators, parents and community members is not simply about struggle, but on a full range of life experiences. Lives are rich and complex and, without romanticizing, worthy of considerations far beyond re/action to an oppressor. While refusing any idyllic notion of holism existing in cultures outside some accepted mainstream, I want to acknowledge that efforts to realize complexity are exploding into the worlds of analysis. What better place to base the complexity than outside the staleness of our old analytic tools and solidly in the lands and territories where we study.

A person whose work is a constituent part of First Nations discourse, Huron philosopher Georges Sioui (1992) provides an analysis of history which insists that the land will prevail in teaching people of immigrant ancestry how to live with it and, by my extension, how to theorize in good relation to it. His argument, which is too complex to explore in detail here, is one which challenges many understandings of conventional materialist analysis. And yet how much more materially based can one get than to recognize the inescapable, determining power of the land and the connections between land and people? It is precisely analyses such as his which serve to disrupt and reconfigure Eurocentric ways of thinking about the world and our relations to it. It is precisely analyses such as his on which our survival, both materially and analytically, depends. And, even as I write this, I resist any simple acceptance of an analysis which sidesteps considerations of power relations. I fear a creeping liberalism that will reconstitute a discourse of caring and harmony and mask an imperialist agenda that stealthily benefits from such analysis.

Although the four questions this article addresses have no easy answers, I refuse paralysis. I strive to find a sensitivity which will allow me to see a good way to proceed in order to serve, to be useful to the people who agree to work with me. I recognize that one dimension of continuing my work may be knowing when to withdraw, when *not* to conduct research in sites where I have been of use. Perhaps it is my white skin privilege which leads me in the final analysis to an incessant desire to contribute to a project of (re)building the university in a way which acknowledges its strengths, recognizes its historic shortcomings, and feels a need to shift priorities and redefine its ‘business’ in an effort to address some conception of social justice. Perhaps within a politics of engagement (Mohanty, in Meiners, 1997) and coalition work (Reagon, 1983) lies the way—putting identity work in its place as a timelimited activity before the next work begins and engaging in the painful work of contextually and temporally situated coalition work (Meiners, 1997). The Trojan horse which will fundamentally alter and make meaningful the work of academe to those who have traditionally been excluded is nearing the gates. Let’s be brave and curious enough to open the door.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the 1997 American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting as part of a symposium entitled *Angst-ridden Research: perspectives, politics and practices from the field*. The symposium included papers by two of my

doctoral students at the time, Erica Meiners and Susan Tilley, and discussion by Dr Leslie Roman of the University of British Columbia.

2. I use the term First Nations/Aboriginal to refer to the communities with which I have worked over the years. First Nations is a highly politicized term, incorporated into the name of the national Assembly of First Nations, the most visible and active lobbying group in Canada. The term itself incorporates the notion of primacy of place while its plural form gestures to the many different nations within what is now called Canada. Aboriginal, on the other hand, is a term which includes people of First Nations ancestry who for one reason or another are not associated with a particular First Nation. Many people who identify with the term Aboriginal live in urban settings.

3. I will tell you some of *my* stories because I do not have permission from the women to tell anything of theirs.

4. This essay benefited from the insights of Jo-ann Archibald, Rita Jack, Didi Khayatt, Erica Meiners, Leslie Roman, and Grace Mirehouse, who may disagree with me but whose comments and discussions have fed my thoughts. I am grateful to my partner Didi Khayatt for pushing me to put the finishing touches on the paper and send it out.

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