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*“The classroom is where our future well-being, both economic and social, is being forged. It is where we will discover whether our model of diversity passes or fails”* (E. Greenspon, *Globe and Mail*, p. A2, 14-04-07).

The editorial comment above puts a strong onus on schools for well-being and economic success. This comment belies much of the academic literature and school policy-making which tends to posit a lack of academic success (often read as secondary school graduation) on the culture and identity of racialized students. The problem and practice of culture and identity in education often serve to depoliticize and dehistoricize the social, economic, and political differences and inequalities that exist. Yet these concepts of culture and equity are not easily separated. They collide and elide with one another in multiple ways: particularly for racialized students in public schooling.

Hall (1997) defines identities as multiple, contradictory, relational, and always in process: they embody both possibilities and limitations on how individuals understand themselves and each other and ultimately how lives are lived” (p. 37). These terms ‘relational’ and ‘multiple’ provide a way of talking about identities as contextualized within socio-cultural political locations: relational in terms of power relations and inseparable from connections to race, ethnicity, class, and gender, and multiple as being related to many contexts and identifications. Critical and cultural scholars (James, 1999; McCarthy, 1995a; Yon, 2000) have re-cast identity within a performative context, meaning “in terms of the effects of political struggles over social and economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, and cultural and ideological repression” (McCarthy, 1995b, p. 263).

McCarthy, Crichlow, Dimitriadis and Dolby (2005) link identity research in education to understanding the

... performative impact of racial affiliation and antagonism in education and society. And like culture, identity is understood to animate material and imaginary terrains of struggle, where aggression but also abiding possibilities for future productive forms of affiliation and collaboration both reside—neither reducible to the other. (p. xxvii)

Indigenous scholars have researched culture and identity (Lawrence, 2003; Restoule, 2004) and cultural theory within education (e.g. Grantham Campbell, 2005; Reid, 2001; St. Denis, 2002) through a variety of perspectives and theories. Quecha scholar Sandy Grande (2007) challenges the post-modern/post-colonial theorizing on identity and education that fails to challenge the colonial education project, under theorizes historical macro-structural determinants through identity research, and fails to conceptualize decolonized models of education. She notes that “...in spite of its democratic promise, postmodernism and its ludic theories of identity fail to provide indigenous communities the theoretical grounding for asserting their claims as colonized peoples, and, more important, impede construction of transcendent emancipatory theories”(p. 112).

Thus, McCarthy et al. and Grande speak to the material and imaginary terrains of struggle which link performative identities to Giroux's (1994) 'pedagogies of possibility'. In reviewing the literature on educational identity research with Aboriginal youth Anzaldúa's (1987) border theory informs my theoretical and personal approaches to cultural identity and how we live together. She says that by

*living in a multicultural society, we cross into each other's worlds all the time. We live in each other's pockets, occupy each other's territories, live in close proximity and in intimacy with each other at home, in school, at work. We are mutually complicitous--us and them, white and colored, straight and queer, Christian and Jew, self and Other, oppressor and oppressed. We all of us find ourselves in the position of being simultaneously insider/outsider. The Spanish word "nosotras" means "us." In theorizing insider/outsider I write the word with a slash between nos (us) and otras (others). Today the division between the majority of "us" and "them" is still intact. This country does not want to acknowledge its walls or limits, the places some people are stopped or stop themselves, the lines they aren't allowed to cross. . . . [But] the future belongs to those who cultivate cultural sensitivities to differences and who use these abilities to forge a hybrid consciousness that transcends the "us" vs. "them" mentality and will carry us into a nosotras position bridging the extremes of our cultural realities. Reuman, A. (2000) "Coming Into Play: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa" MELUS, 25 (2).*

My self-identity—who I am, where I am, and how I connect to the discourses and practices of identity research—also inform my writing. My positionality is explored below.

### *Personal Locatedness*

For the first half of my life I lived as a White middle-class child, youth, and then woman. My father's grandparents came from the Ukraine to western Canada through an offer of land for farming. My mother's grandparents came from Alsace in Europe, settled in America as Pennsylvania Dutch, and later immigrated to Canada. Both of my parents have genealogical books tracing their family roots back to the Old Country and their routes to their current home in Ontario. I read and knew these books growing up.

I have lived the second half of my life as a White, culturally-mixed, middle class woman but in 1984 I gained Indian status, through marriage. The year after I married and became a status Indian, under the federal legislation of the Indian Act, my sister-in-law lost her Indian status, through marriage. These events marked the first time I had ever considered race and its relationship to culture. The contradiction of representation—that seemingly crosses racial boundaries without consideration identity or culture—has for over twenty years provoked me to consider the historical, social and political contexts that made these situations possible. I maintain a peripheral belonging to the urban Aboriginal community through choice or border work (Haig Brown, 1992) —personally through friendships and professionally through community-based work.

A critical review of the cultural identity and schooling literature

*“The misrepresentation, commodification, and distortion of indigenous identities have existed from the moment of first contact”* (Bataille, 2001, p. 1)

From the research literature I begin by acknowledging that cultural identities in this context are post-contact and within this context there are historical, social, and political factors relevant to cultural identity for Aboriginal students: Indian Residential Schools; essentialized versus complex views of cultural identity; and, definitional versus contextualized ways of looking at identity. I explore these factors and then I critique the cultural (in)congruence discourse and the discourse of life chances through a sample of the academic research literature as well as non-academic or grey literature.

*Indian Residential Schools<sup>1</sup>*

The intersection of race and culture with education for indigenous youth needs to acknowledge what Grande (2000) names cultural genocide. Cultural genocide refers here to the systematic, deliberate, colonial attempts at assimilating Aboriginal peoples. In the case of Residential Schooling it refers to the federal government’s stated purpose of assimilating children into mainstream society through separation from their families, segregation within residential schools, and the type of schooling provided. The Indian Residential Schools period is a significant historical period of Aboriginal education that continues to influence schooling for Aboriginal peoples. A full review of Indian Residential Schools and its implications is beyond the scope of this paper (for more about Indian Residential Schools see Miller, 1996).

*Representations, Essentialism, and Authenticity*

*Decolonization, then, must involve deconstructing and reshaping how we understand indigenous identity* (Lawrence, 2003, p. 3).

Lawrence’s statement belies the complexity of deconstructing the historical misrepresentations and externally-defined representations of indigenous identities. These misrepresentations have led to ideas about indigenous peoples in many disciplines within social sciences, the arts, and sciences (e.g. forestry). Representations that have been reified in other discourses get replicated in faculties of education and schools. Federal governments in North America continue to be engaged in defining who can identify legally as indigenous.

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1. I use the term Indian when I am directly quoting someone’s work, or for citing the federal government’s legal terms or programs established through the Indian Act and used by the departments of Indian Affairs and Statistics Canada. In quoting others I use the identity that he/she provides to the reader: when an ethnic identity is not provided I describe authors as indigenous or Aboriginal.

In this section I present a brief overview of the complexity of representation, essentialism, and authenticity to show the historical, social, and political connections to cultural identities.

There are different ways of understanding essentialism and Henderson (2000) shows the commonly held dimensions and the problem of cultural identity. He states that “[a]round the globe, Aboriginal thinkers have had to prove that the received notion of ‘culture’ as unchanging and homogenous is not only mistaken but also irrelevant” (2000, p. 255). Henderson’s terms ‘unchanging and homogenous’ defines an essentialized view of culture; a view of culture without consideration for differences between nations, and variations within groups. Yon (2000) defines an essentialized view of culture as a “...dominant view of subjects as the unified objects of a culture which tells us who we are. Cultures are viewed as objects that can be set against each other” (p. 6). The problem of homogenous and static views of culture is that it frames the cultural identity research that flows from these understandings. Rummens (2001) interdisciplinary review of research found that Aboriginal identity studies ranged from traditional culture and lifestyles to issues of cultural retention, assimilation, and marginalization. She notes that few researchers address topics such as “identity transition, non-traditional religious identities, and well as the link between native identity and sport” (p. 8).

Essentialist perspectives create static or fixed images of indigenous peoples; where traditional cultures and lifestyle can be juxtaposed with its opposite of assimilation and marginalization. Typically indigenous peoples have been represented by non indigenous peoples throughout history in popular culture (see Berkhoffer, 1978), media (see Francis, 1992), research (see Smith, 1999), and literature (see Bataille, 2001), etc. In striving for racial or cultural differences that can be codified and enduring, essentialisms set Othered peoples apart and perpetuate misconceptions and stereotypes (McCarthy, 1995a; Lattas, 1993).

Some indigenous scholars differentiate essentialism from pan-indigenous epistemologies. For example, Valaskakis (2005) shows the tension of complexity—avoiding essentialisms that do not recognize difference while acknowledging indigenous peoples’ commonalities saying that

the cultures, languages, and environments of Native America are wide-ranging, relevant and real, and generalizing involves the dangers of essentializing. But common cultural currents run through the mosaic of Native nations that constitute Indian Country, expressing similar representations of land, spirituality, and governance... (p. 6).

Essentialism also relates directly to authenticity and defining who is an indigenous person. Lawrence (2003) shows how the Indian Act in Canada serves to control every aspect of Indian life (p. 3) and has regulated Native identity (p. 5) for over a century. Specifically, she shows how identity is racialized and gendered. These gendered identities refer to the issue, that I relate in the personal locatedness above, of how “section 12 (1) b of the Indian Act discriminated against Indian women by stripping them and their descendants of their Indian status if the married a man without Indian status” (p.

13). In 1985 the passing of Bill-C31 reinstated status to women, but not before the challenge had been rejected through Canadian court system to the level of the Supreme Court. It was Sandra Lovelace's United Nations' challenge that forced the change to the Indian Act section (Lawrence, 2003). Like residential schooling, the impacts of over one hundred years of legislative disenfranchisement has had long term impacts for these women and their children's identification with indigenous communities. This gendered example shows how the Indian Act denied women's identifications with indigenous communities and how race, ethnicity and gender can interact with identities.

Many indigenous scholars (e.g. Graveline, 1999; Grande, 2007, Henderson, 2000; Lawrence, 2003; Restoule, 2000) denounce legislative identities and the essentialisms and divisions between peoples that legislative identities have created. These legal definitions have served to define Aboriginal peoples and have led to a discourse of authenticity legislatively and in other areas (see Lattas, 1993).

*Definitional versus contextual approaches to cultural identity*

...In cross-cultural research one can have definitions or one can have context, but not both at the same time. In other words, the more one tries to define something the more one removes it from its context. The more one recognizes the context of something, the less possible it is to give a specific definition of it. This is one of the difficulties of designing a Western-style course with an understanding of how Native people think or how we work with education. The more we try defining it, the more it loses the context and value and ceases to be a living thing. The more we recognize Native culture as a living thing, the more indefinite we are in trying to define what it is we are talking about, because it will vary." (Tafoya, 1995 p. 19)

Another issue around race, culture, and schooling is how identity is framed, definitionally or contextually. Scholars (e.g. Berry, 1999; Liebler, 2004) researching cultural identity by definitional approach consider cultural identity against an existing externally-derived measure of culture. The two studies described below illustrate the definitional approach.

Berry (1999) defines Aboriginal cultural identity from a psychological perspective through five pre-determined features. Using the data from Absolon and Winchester's (1994) RCAP research learning circles, he compared circle participants to his pre-determined features.

Liebler's (2004) study examined mixed-race Aboriginal respondents' identity and identification. She used respondents' reporting on three United States census criteria -- tribal affiliation, American Indian language use, and residence in a metropolitan area to hypothesize the thickness or thinness of their racial ties. Of note is that for Liebler residence in a metropolitan area contributed to thinness of racial ties and thus reduced Aboriginality of respondents.

Definitional approaches based in census data criteria evolve from legislative definitions. In Canada legislative definitions for Aboriginal peoples stem from the Indian Act and its iterations (Coates, 1999). These legislative and census-based definitions tend to use race-based, legal representations of Aboriginal peoples to determine membership and status and thus identity (or representations). As well, cultural is viewed as something one possesses—posited—through outward identifiers (e.g. Aboriginal language knowledge).

Other scholars (Absolon & Winchester, 1994; Restoule, 2000) use a self-defined, situational, and contextualized approach, i.e. cultural identity as the intersection of race, identity, identifying, representation, or as interactional constructs. For these scholars, cultural identity is fluid, situational, and processural. These scholars see the constructs of identity contextually and self-defined by respondents.

Absolon and Winchester (1994) note that “when we set out to understand and describe identity we have to build constructs that are inclusive of all, or we may contribute to a subtle form of ‘ethnic cleansing’ by defining narrowly who is and who is not part of the community of Aboriginal people” (CD-ROM, n.p.). Methods include talking circles in urban centres across Canada.

Restoule (2004) investigated how urban Aboriginal men maintain an Aboriginal cultural identity. Through learning circles, he found that cultural identity is shaped through everyday relationships. His findings support previous findings (Hall, 1996, James, 1999) of identity as a dynamic process and identifying as ongoing, exclusive, and tied to material and symbolic resources

There is a tension in the literature between viewing identity essentially and definitionally (as established criteria to be demonstrated) and viewing cultural identity as contextually, relationally, and self-defined rather than researcher-defined. As well, culture is viewed as fluid or as received and passed on (i.e. posited) respectively.

Employing a both/and approach to Aboriginal peoples’ cultural identity, the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres [OFIFC] (2005) frames urban cultural identity as including

... the influence of traditional factors such as ancestry, appearance, and culture (knowledge of language and culture); comparison of traditional factors with ‘situational/relationship’ factors, such as shared urban history, networks of relationships, Aboriginal organizations and community participation; “First Nation” versus “pan-Indian” sources of identity; the potential role of urban self-government to reinforce Aboriginal identity and culture in urban areas; the role of Elders in the city; and the impact of multi generations in the city (p. 3).

The OFIFC was established in the 1960’s to assist Aboriginal newcomers’ settlement into cities. Yet urban Aboriginal peoples is a contested terms. Indigenous author Thomas King (2005) challenges indigenous/non-indigenous

relationships, particularly framing these relationships through the concept of urban Aboriginal, in his short story *A short history of Indians in Canada*.

Aboriginal peoples attend public schools in urban centres and the cultural incongruence theory to explain Aboriginal students' failure rates in education has been taken up and used for the past 40 years. The following section explores the cultural incongruence discourse in education.

### *Cultural (In)congruence*

The concept of culture and identity for Aboriginal youth and schooling has been an ongoing yet ambiguously framed discourse since the 1967 release of the Hawthorne report. Hawthorne (1967) states the purpose of the report as examining “schooling and its adequacy” (original emphasis, , part II, p.6) from the perspective of “making schools better for the unhappy or failing Indian child” (part II, p. 7). Despite the stated purpose, the research theorizes cultural incongruence throughout. Hawthorne defines culture as “the totality of behaviour, values, attitudes, and other characteristics of a given group” (p. 107). Although he notes “[t]he error of referring to the Indians as a homogenous group throughout the nation...” the report does not distinguish indigenous peoples of Canada and Hawthorne provide a homogenized perspective throughout the report.

Hawthorne (1967) outlines cultural dissonance theory in the Definition of Key Terms section. In the next section on Basic Assumptions, he notes that refers to ‘a discontinuity of experience’ that impedes scholastic achievement. The following section confirms this assumption as reasonable based on the data gathered for the study. Cultural discontinuity is not a question of if, but rather how it happens. Hawthorne states that “[f]or the child the outcome [of differences in outlook between teacher and student] is a challenge to his identity (part II, p. 7). He looks at early socialization, environmental factors of shelter, food, clothing, and objects (e.g., toys and books) and psychological factors (e.g., verbal nature, parent interest, discipline, and routines for learning) and compares Aboriginal to middle-class non-Aboriginal families as homogenous, distinct groups. Hawthorne summarizes the section on identity by concluding that schooling forces Aboriginal children “between being an Indian or an Indian “White”” (p. 126). He adds that the choice of becoming White is not an available option.

Hawthorne’s (1967) study provided the theoretical ground for many further studies which advocated cultural incongruence theories that posit Aboriginal students’ failure as the result of cultural clashes in schools. The Hawthorne study criteria, framed as deficits, can be seen through the research as cultural clashes. These cultural clashes are manifested in the individual as his/her identity ‘crisis’ precipitating school leaving before graduation.

In the ensuing forty years the cultural discourse has remained fundamental to educational research literature (Demmert Jr., 2001; Deyhle & Swisher, 1996; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; RCAP, 1996) with studies predominantly “using a cultural framework for the analysis of schooling and Aboriginal children, parents, and communities” (Deyhle & Swisher, 1996, p. 117). Researchers have used an array of

research approaches and topics—differences in the home environment, parenting style, communication styles, learning styles, and cooperative rather than competitive orientations—and found cultural incongruity. One commonality has been essentialism, viewed both culturally as well as theoretically.

Culture, in these studies, is viewed as something inherited and passed along (posited). Culture is also considered as something that is non-situational and non-performative (i.e. without consideration for the power relations within the classroom and larger school environment, or within the larger society). Cultural incongruity is often locally contextualized, rather than defined, yet findings are often cited and treated as generalizable.

Theoretically, essentialism can also refer to a single cause (McCarthy, 1995 a). Through the array of research approaches and topics used to look at Aboriginal students and their relationships with public schooling, researchers have found cultural incongruence to explain failure. More recently, indigenous scholars have added “social context, nuance, and language in the dynamics of race relations” (McCarthy, 1995 b, p. 262) as the following section demonstrates.

*Cultural congruence theory with macrostructural theory*

Deyhle and Swisher (1996) note the predominance of studies “using a cultural framework for the analysis of schooling and Aboriginal children, parents, and communities” (p. 117). Based on their meta-analysis of culturally focused research studies in educational anthropology and sociology, they undertook to understand educational success and failure of aboriginal students. Deyhle and Swisher (1996) concluded that understanding the cultural context is not enough. They explain that the teacher’s control of participation, pacing of instruction, and organization of teacher-dominated instruction are important elements that cross cultural and power relationships in the classroom.

Other scholars have found that culture and identity are not experienced homogenously (Cain, 2002) and that cultural congruence may undertheorize Aboriginal youths’ academic success (Kanu, 2007; Ledlow, 1992; Reid, 2001; St. Denis, 2002). The role of and power within institutions, the assimilative commission implicit in singular ways of knowing, and youth agency are absent from the larger success/failure studies. These researchers suggest approaches, beyond cultural incongruity theory, that are articulated with culture to theorize urban Aboriginal youths’ attachment to and alienation from schooling. Ledlow’s (1992) meta-analysis of research and St. Denis’ study using interviews and critical discourse analysis are examples of research showing cultural congruency language and essentialism to be problematic.

Ledlow (1992) analyzed research studies on cultural incongruence to explain the high dropout rate for American Indian high school students. Her arguments against a cultural discontinuity theory are threefold: 1) cultural discontinuity and its opposite for success culturally-relevant curriculum is rarely defined and is a taken for granted assumption to improve Aboriginal students school performance; 2) no evidence is provided to support the culturally-relevant success claims; and, 3) how and why culturally-relevant

curriculum will prove successful is rarely discussed. Ledlow (1992) does not comment on whether nor how culture and identity is differently experienced by youth in these studies, as Cain's (2002) study found.

St. Denis' (2002) interviewed indigenous teachers and used Foucauldian critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze documents and interviews. St. Denis found that the cultural difference discourse is a "widely accepted explanation for this educational failure" and that the cultural discourse actually "can aide and facilitate practices of inequality" (p. 2). She recommends a both/and approach, that is, using culturally relevant education with critical race analysis through poststructural constructs of difference, identity, and inequality.

### Conclusion

Thus, the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and class as it relates to Aboriginal students' identities is be framed through historical, social, and political contexts of Indian Residential Schools, misconceptualizations of indigenous peoples and their cultures as essentialized, and definitional or contextual approaches to identity.

These factors have had an impact on researchers' use of cultural congruence theory as a single cause for Aboriginal students' success in public schooling, although the research provides ambiguous findings. Much of the educational research continues to use essentialized notions of culture through its adherence to cultural incongruity theory to explain Aboriginal students' school leaving. This theoretical framework can also be seen as essentializing, in that it provides a single cause for all Aboriginal students' school failure. Recently scholars have re-considered cultural identity through their research methodologies. These scholars have found that cultural congruence theory fails to adequately theorize the race relations of schooling and Aboriginal students' success or failure. Cultural congruence theory, despite its noted limitations (Ledlow, 1992), continues to be used along with macrostructural theories to examine factors beyond the students, teachers, and classroom settings.

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