COALESCING IN COHORTS: BUILDING COALITIONS IN FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION

Dolores van der Wey
Simon Fraser University

Cohorts are commonly formed in Indigenous undergraduate and graduate education programs. In this article, I have examined the notion of coalition building in the context of First Nations graduate cohorts. I interviewed women from a range of cohort experiences, asking – Is intra-group and inter-group coalition building a priority within cohorts? From these interviews, I conclude that cohorts ought to be sites for intra-group coalition work among First Nations students, and that the cohort experience should prepare students for inter-group encounters as well.

Key words: intra-group dynamics, inter-group dynamics, cross-cultural communication

La formation de cohortes est une chose courante dans les programmes d'éducation de premier et de deuxième cycles s'adressant aux autochtones. Dans cet article, l'auteure examine la notion de coalition dans le contexte des cohortes de diplômés autochtones. Des entrevues effectuées auprès de femmes de diverses cohortes au sujet de leurs expériences au sein de cohortes et dans des contextes interculturels ont fait émerger une nouvelle question : la mise sur pied de coalitions intragroupe ou intergroupes est-elle une priorité au sein des cohortes ? L'auteure conclut que les cohortes devraient être des lieux favorisant le travail de coalition intragroupe chez les étudiants autochtones et que l'expérience de la cohorte devrait aussi préparer les étudiants à des rencontres avec d'autres groupes.

Mots clés : dynamique intragroupe, dynamique intergroupes, communication interculturelle

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In his essay, "What Is It About Us That You Don't Like?" Thomas King (2003) begins a story about Coyote and the Ducks with Coyote noticing a group of ducks swimming in a river. It was his daily ritual to come down to the bank to admire his beautiful fur coat, which was reflected in the river. He observed the ducks' lovely, long, well-tended, glowing feathers. Coyote noted how they sang and danced, and swam around in circles. The Ducks explained to Coyote that they danced to achieve peace and harmony and their singing was to keep all in balance. Swimming in circles, they explained, served to remind everyone of their relationship to the earth. It quickly became apparent that Coyote's objective, when he asked for one feather and then returned for more, was to meet his own selfish needs and desires without concern for how he was bilking the ducks in the process.

King uses this story as a springboard to provide readers with his overview of how federal policies in the United States and Canada have served and continue to serve both to relieve Native people from land and to legalize Native people out of existence. It is a convincing story. He takes up the issue of Indian identity, noting how, in Canada, the Indian Act[1] has paternalistically defined who is an Indian and who is not, suggesting that amendments within the act have the power to "make Indians disappear in a twinkle" (p. 132). As King points out, the outcome of identity legislation has not solely been to remove all traces of Indians from the North American landscape; it has been to pit Native against Native. The creation of legal categories has, he argues, speaking from the perspective of a Native person, made us our own enemy. The messiness of issues of Indian identity is pervasive in King's essays, the source of which may be tied to identity legislation where questions such as "Who is an Indian?" have become "Whom will we allow to be an Indian?" King's views on this topic, I suggest, serve as well to illuminate solipsistic stances about what Indigenous knowledge is, what constitutes an Indigenous ontology, and accordingly, what it is to be an Indian. I support King's argument that there are many ways to be Indigenous and suggest that to be Indigenous may be partially underpinned with the messages relayed by the ducks in King's story.

King alludes as well to what he terms "the uninformed public" who resent what they consider to be gifts paid to Native people. Some utter

platitudes about "the need to move ahead," to recognize that times have changed, who view termination legislation as a means to facilitate such "forward movement," or see the legislation as a means of freeing Indians from the shackles that status has created. In attempting to explicate an array of plausible responses to these platitudes in relation to the question that is the title of his essay (What is it about us that you don't like?), King suggests that it may, at least in part, be due to racism. He clarifies that he is referring to a softer racism than, for example, apartheid in South Africa or slavery in the United States, a racism that may include a fondness for Natives and their culture or what he describes as "a racism infused with a suffocating paternalism that can gently strangle the life out of a people" (p. 145). In any case, it is a racism that is focused on the more exotic aspects of Native life.

The issues embedded in King's essay are complex. He provokes the reader to examine policies that have led to intra-group and inter-group divisiveness within and beyond Native communities, and to recognize, or at least consider, rights of identity as a privilege of power. Intra-group and inter-group tensions and issues of identity are elements of coalition politics. Yet, King leaves his readers with the suggestion that the outcome of termination legislation is ultimately "no more Ducks." He ponders who will sing and dance for Native peoples, and who will remind us of our interconnectedness. In doing so, I suggest, he opens a space to engage coalition and reparative politics, a space where the "Ducks" may have power to impact their future.

In this article I examine this notion of coalition building[2] in the context of First Nations[3] graduate cohorts and ask – Is intra-group and inter-group coalition building a priority within cohorts? In the process I argue that cohorts ought to be sites for intra-group coalition work among First Nations students; indeed, the cohort experience should prepare students for inter-group encounters as well. As Burack (2004) points out, identity groups are not homogeneous entities. Rather, they represent collections of differently situated members whose distinctions require ongoing confrontation and negotiation with difference; that is, intra-group contexts are inherently at once inter-group contexts. I define coalitions before discussing the purposes and principles of coalitions, and clarifying the relationship between intra- and inter-group coalitions.

Then, I address some of the assumptions, misunderstandings, and lack of knowledge of Indigenous ways of being and knowing that have rendered cross-cultural communication problematic for Indigenous peoples, what King (2003) might refer to as "the uninformed public." Based on participants' input I articulate the challenges and benefits of coalition building and safer discursive arenas. Finally, I take a recursive pass over King's essay to illuminate his arguments in relation to mine, and to offer concluding statements. But I begin by describing the origins of the study and the participants.

THE ORIGINS OF THE STUDY AND THE PARTICIPANTS

In recent years, I have worked with First Nations graduate cohorts (predominantly made up of women) in a range of capacities including as course instructor where I have had opportunities to make observations about group dynamics and the apparent importance members placed on relationship and network building. Some of the graduate cohorts required students to take their entire program together (closed cohorts); others were more loosely configured cohorts where students took few courses together, the balance in mainstream classrooms (open cohorts), but seemed to gather in informal or non-required ways on a semi-regular basis. In some cases I observed students who in various ways expressed a strong desire for separation in classroom contexts from members of the dominant society, a desire to be in classrooms where First Nations students dominated in numbers giving them an opportunity to speak. As a result of my observations of First Nations cohorts, in particular while teaching, I wondered about the students educational experiences and what role these sites might play in preparing students to engage positively in cross-cultural communication.

The criterion for participation in the study was straightforward. All participants were First Nations women who were or had been members of a graduate program and had experienced a First Nations cohort, including, in some cases, at the undergraduate level. Because the majority of First Nations graduate students are women, I opted for an in-depth analysis of their experiences. In a similar vein, I invited the participation of only First Nations women (including those Aboriginal women who identified as Métis and mixed ancestry) rather than opening

the study to other Indigenous peoples. This decision supports the view expressed by Eber Hampton (1995) that confining the study to the multiple First Nations represented in my sample allowed for the possibility of making a greater contribution towards a theory of *cohortness* and cross-cultural dialogue than could be offered were I to attempt to "gather all disparate [global] tribes and communities into one grand model" (p. 12). I selected a sample of 13 women to explore their experiences in depth rather than in breadth.

My research interests, in general, are informed by my own background and experiences as a woman of mixed Haida and Coast Salish ancestry, as an academic, and as a former grade-school teacher. While teaching a course with a closed First Nations graduate cohort, my interest in cohorts was piqued. As the course unfolded I made observations of the day-to-day interactions among the women. My research questions were formulated from a desire to open the space to explicate the range and complexity of the women's varied backgrounds prior to their cohort experience, which ultimately led to an exploration of the relationship between coalition politics and cohorts in Indigenous contexts.

METHODOLOGY

I made the decision to examine the notion of *cohortness* rather than focus on one graduate cohort to explore varying manifestations of what cohort membership meant to students. After receiving seven expressions of interest in the topic from the 16 who had been members of closed cohorts who I was able to contact and, upon completion of initial semi-structured interviews, I examined the data carefully to make decisions about how to proceed. What would provide the richest data in terms of coming to better understand First Nations female graduate students' worldviews, varying interpretations of the notion of cohortness, and the role such membership plays in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue?

Through snowball sampling, six additional women agreed to participate in the study. The interviewees ranged in age from their mid-twenties to their mid-fifties. The contexts in which they worked included adult education centres, First Nations program coordination and facilitation in school districts, grade-school classrooms, and public school administration. Some were members of First Nations bands, located

throughout the province, and had spent their formative years there, while others had spent much of their lives in urban centres, sometimes some distance from their bands of origin. That is, their origins, backgrounds, and experiences were disparate. While conducting follow-up interviews, it became quickly apparent that it would be unwise to proceed with planned focus group interviews. To do so would put at risk the relationships between the women who, in some cases, had chosen to use a pseudonym yet were speaking with frankness about some of the intra-group tensions and challenges. This situation was rendered even more problematic given that one cohort program was still in process. At that point, I recognized that what I sought most was to hear each woman's individual story, each educational, and cohort experience. It was also important to respect their desire for anonymity if requested. All transcripts were returned to participants so that they could add, delete, clarify, or extend on their stories, ideas, and insights. All offered feedback.

As noted earlier, I began my research in a quest to explore the cohort experience of First Nations female graduate students, to hear about their educational experiences, in general, and to provide a location for them to discuss their experiences with cross-cultural contexts. However, although I anticipated hearing stories of the challenges encountered with cross-cultural communication, the analysis of the many incidences of perceived silencing within the cohort led to a third question – Is intra-group and inter-group coalition building a priority within cohorts? I continue to explore this latter question while researching and teaching in university contexts. It is this question that I take up in this article.

EXPLORING COALITION POLITICS

Cynthia Burack (2004) defines coalitions as the "joint activity of autonomous groups, either for a single purpose or to pursue long-term social, economic, or political goals" (pp. 150-151). As she points out, some feminists consider groups with short-term goals to be coalitions and those of a more long-term nature to be alliances. The Oxford Paperback Dictionary Thesaurus (2001) also defines "coalition" as "a temporary alliance" and "coalesce" as "come or bring together to form a mass or whole" (p. 158). I find the term "coalition" to be more suited to the

university settings where my research is focused, especially when working within short-term programs or classrooms but I also recognize the long-term underlying goals of various initiatives. Accordingly, I use the term "alliance" in instances where it seems more appropriate.

In any case, Kimberle Crenshaw (1997) has argued that the role of intra-group dynamics in creating less destructive relations between groups is critical. Organized identity groups are not monolithic but made up of members who will have different and perhaps competing identities as well. As Cynthia Burack (2004) has articulated, rather than viewing these "competing identities" as a threat to group solidarity, "we should view [them] as an opportunity for bridge building and coalition politics" (p. 142). Although coalition work has been the focus of Black feminist thought, there is a dearth of research on the topic as it relates to Indigenous contexts. The work of novelist, poet, and scholar Jeannette Armstrong (2005), who has written on the Okanagan principle of *enow'kin*, is one exception insofar as she recognizes the implications of unresolved intra-group dynamics. According to Armstrong, the traditional chiefs of the Okanagan people of British Columbia used to call for enow'kin from time to time. When they did, it was understood that they were asking the people to make a decision, while realizing that each person came to the gathering with a different interest. Underpinning the principle of enow'kin is the understanding that all participants need not agree, but they must recognize the "common ground on which our differences rest" (p. 31). Implicit in such a principle is the recognition of the role of intra-group dynamics in creating less destructive relations among groups that Crenshaw (1997) alludes to. Scholars committed to coalition and reparative politics acknowledge the resistance, tensions, and messiness inherent in such initiatives, while simultaneously arguing that these initiatives are absolutely essential to understanding and putting an end to the destructive impacts of colonization.

According to Burack (2004), coalition politics may be conceptualized at three levels of analysis, which correspond to three levels of conflict: conflict within the self, within the group, and between groups. I support Burack's view that the processes of all three coalitional frames are mutually constitutive, that the frames are inextricably related to one another. Further, reparative politics and the recognition of wholeness and com-

monality are a result of will and creativity rather than passive discovery. That is, I argue that the complex dialectic between negotiating inclusion in the group and negotiating an individual's own conflicting ideals and beliefs is enhanced if individuals "come to the table" willing to explore their own anxieties about differences within and between groups and will resist the tendency or desire to deny intra-group differences.

Reagon (1983) lays out what she calls the principles of coalition (similar to the principle of enow'kin), emphasizing that individuals do not go into coalition work because it is comfortable or because they like it; rather, they go in because it is necessary. She acknowledges that because of the challenges for minority groups to be in mainstream society all the time, there is the desire to bar the door, to form a unified front where all who are like them may survive and thrive. In these insular environments, though, there are no opportunities to learn about and take into account the voices, experiences, and perspectives of those who are not like them. Reagon argues, and I concur, that no coalition building is done in such an environment; it does not provide a space for members to develop the ability to cope when non-members enter the room. It is hard, uncomfortable, and sometimes painful work. Therefore, coalition work requires that individuals give, retreat occasionally for nourishment, and then return to the streets "to coalesce some more" (p. 359). First Nations scholar Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) agrees, insisting that "coalition-work must be reflected upon as a necessary strategy" (p. 206); that is, First Nations peoples must build networks and alliances with others who have common aims. These scholars and others (for example, Anzaldua, 2002; Keating, 2002) emphasize that the work of crossing social borders is taxing, even within groups who all consider themselves to suffer from a form of oppression. Despite commonality of oppression there will still be significant differences within potential coalitions.

Although it is important to be mindful about preserving energy and not being a martyr to the coalition, doing coalition work means being willing to be "in trouble with the king" as law professor and critical race feminist Cheryl Harris (1997, p. 101) terms it. Harris draws upon Nigerian novelist and poet Chinua Achebe's argument that there are risks inherent in confronting power, risks that are nonetheless necessary

if one is to embrace the central tasks of social transformation, which Achebe believes to be the work in an unjust society of the artist, poet, and scholar. Harris, too, believes that the work of the scholar is to render what has been previously invisible, visible. It is to tell a different story, to create conditions for others to tell different stories, even if they may be disturbing, annoying, painful, or frightening. That which oppresses must first be exposed to weaken the predominant order. This assertion means, Harris argues, being willing to point out contradictions, to raise consciousness, and to speak on behalf of those still bearing the weight of social inequities and injustice.

Social change storytelling, as Razack (1993) explains, refers to "an opposition to established knowledge, to Foucault's suppressed knowledge, to the experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms" (p. 100). She stresses that when storytelling is used to reach across difference, individuals must overcome the positional difference between the teller and the listener, a significant distinction that must be verbalized and discussed, not assumed. The inequalities in classrooms must be named and ground rules for communication devised for coalition work to be fruitful. Formation of affinity groups must be encouraged and time to coalesce provided for members to be better prepared to then speak, sometimes on behalf of the group. Critical pedagogy, a typical starting point when there is no existing friendship, goodwill, or sense of community, does not probe deeply enough below the surface, Razack argues; rather, those of us who teach for social change must begin with how we know. Epistemology has to enter into our pedagogy and we have to know the limits of our knowing based on our subject positions. The idea of granting epistemic privilege to the oppressed, alluded to by Narayan (1988), deteriorates when there is little understanding of various ways of knowing. As Narayan explains it, members of an oppressed group have a more immediate, subtle, and critical knowledge of their oppression than those who are not members of that particular group. They know how their oppression is experienced, the sometimes-subtle ways it is inflicted, and they have first-hand knowledge how oppressive practices have defined the spaces where they live. For any explanation of a form of oppression to be legitimate, experiences and descriptions of how the oppressed exper-

ience oppresssion must be taken into account, even if such accounts result in the explanatory paradigms of outsiders being shattered. The claim of epistemic privilege implies that people who are not members of the oppressed group must be prepared to work hard at coming to terms with the details of lived oppression. I share an anecdote of a recent incident that is, at once, an example of how and why epistemology must enter pedagogy, and the limits of knowing, an incident that Narayan (1988) might argue, required the granting of epistemic privilege. By sharing the anecdote I endeavor to simultaneously make clear why coalition building is so challenging.

I was participant at a gathering of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators whose common goal is to develop their skills in responding to issues in Aboriginal education. Various participants were offering their perspectives on issues of identity, which were raised in the keynote address that introduced the notion of coalition politics and the implications of coalition building for educators. Before the address began, everyone in the room had been asked to introduce themselves and share where they were from. Not surprisingly, each person took that up differently. In the midst of the "Q&A" session, one non-Aboriginal woman, whom I will refer to as Sandy, stated her frustration at being asked in various contexts to share her name and where she was from. She stated that she disliked being placed in situations where she must explain her background in relation to her ethnicity and language. She didn't accept that identity was an issue in Aboriginal education, suggesting that we should just accept people for who they are without alluding to their ethnicity and other aspects of their backgrounds. After several commentaries were added to the discourse, an Aboriginal woman, whom I will refer to as Margaret, spoke firmly. She had concurred with an earlier argument during the session on the need for Aboriginal worldviews within our pedagogies. Now, in response to the woman, she articulated that the practice of stating who she was, including her Aboriginal name, and her people was a cultural practice of her family and people, one that she had been taught and had embraced since early childhood, and one that she would continue to honor. While Margaret stated that she didn't intend to be rude to the non-Aboriginal woman, she found her comments offensive and potentially silencing. (field notes, January, 2007)

Later, as I reflected on the evening, I recognized this incident had provided a window to make explicit through example and lived experience the arguments made by Razack (1993) and Narayan (1988) in ways that may not be obvious, especially when those assembled may consider themselves to be allies in particular initiatives, in this case, Aboriginal education. Margaret was in effect speaking of how Aboriginal people know that epistemology has entered into our pedagogy. For that to take place, Sandy, as a non-Aboriginal woman, must come to know the limits of her knowing based on her subject position while recognizing the importance of coming to understand more deeply various ways of knowing and being. The granting of epistemic privilege could not occur if Sandy failed to hear Margaret and recognize the importance of the cultural practice of stating who she is and where she comes from as pedagogical. She must recognize and accept that Margaret has a more immediate and subtle knowledge of being oppressed based on repeated previous experiences and contexts where she was rendered silenced, where it was unacceptable to announce who she is, including her Aboriginal name, and where she is from without causing great discomfort or annoyance to others. That she was confident in doing so in this context suggests that she may have viewed it as a space to coalesce, despite the discomfort, potential messiness, and weight of being placed in a situation where she had to speak up, to teach once again. And, if Sandy continued to let this access to knowledge percolate, she too may have grown in her understanding of what it entails to be an ally in Aboriginal education contexts.

This anecdote provides a space to highlight once again the three coalitional frames that Burack (2004) refers to: conflict within the self, within the group, and between groups, the first, I argue, being the most challenging. Participants had earlier recognized and named this gathering as an intra-group context because of the commitment of members to First Nations education while noting that it was inherently inter-group as well because of the range of backgrounds participants brought to and represented at "the table"; that is, it is a group made up of members distinct by other identities, which Burack argues renders such groups "always irreducibly coalitions" (p. 148). This anecdote also serves to make clear the importance of leaders and group members joining to-

gether to mutually interpret interests and goals and lay out a plan for how those ends will be pursued, including the development of tools for working effectively between groups.

TROUBLING THE NOTION OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The other thing I want to say about cross-cultural dialogue kind of implies that there is some . . . that cultures have an equal position, that there is this position that we just have to go across these cultures. I think that is not an accurate way of looking at where our cultures are positioned, and that our cultures are positioned in a racial way, that 'culture' has come to replace the term 'race', that people conceptualize it in the way that race seems to be conceptualized, and so it's a myth or a fantasy that there can be cross-cultural dialogue because there is this inference that we have that there is social equality then, that there is social equality between cultures. And that doesn't exist because our cultures are positioned in a lower place in our society; we're 'lower than' so that there isn't equality, there can't be a dialogue across cultures because we're not positioned in the same way. I don't know what you're going to call it though, because if you don't call it 'cross-cultural dialogue', what is it going to be called? (Liz's follow-up interview, April 16, 2003)

The notion of "cross-cultural dialogue" or "cross-cultural communication" is problematic and complex as suggested in the quotation above from a research participant and cohort member, and accordingly, an extensive review of the literature is beyond the scope of this article. I will, however, touch upon the literature lightly to provide links to my arguments on the imperative of engaging in and understanding more deeply the merits of coalition politics. As St. Denis (2004) argues, culture has come to replace the term race and this acknowledgement in itself supports the argument that there is not social equality between cultures, that, for example, Indigenous cultures are positioned on a lower rung in society, at least as the dominant society perceives Indigenous peoples. It is also important to avoid making assumptions that individuals in university classrooms and other gathering places necessarily feel safe enough, or confident enough in who they are, to be open about sharing aspects of their identity, readily observable aspects or otherwise.

Tierney (1993) argues that it is not enough to put forth theoretical propositions as to why particular groups encounter difficulties upon

entering postsecondary institutions. Theories must not only explain what is, but what could be. In reviewing the literature on the challenges of minority groups (in particular Indigenous people) in the academy, I find it clear that misconceptions abound, assumptions are frequently drawn, and members of the dominant society perpetuate stereotypes on a regular basis. As Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West made clear in a discussion with Sam Tatenhaus (2004), it is a misconception that African Americans necessarily view school integration as desirable and accept that separate inherently spells unequal. In fact, what African Americans were seeking when they agreed to be bussed out of the inner cities was school excellence. If predominantly Black schools could be made excellent, Gates suggests, that would be a satisfactory goal. He further comments that without economic integration, there will be no residential integration. Without school quality there will be no economic integration. Gates argues, then, that the lack of school quality in urban segregated schools is not because the schools are "all-black-and-brown schools" but because the Blacks are poor and that has prompted the Black middle class to move into the suburbs (p. 3). The Blacks are poor in terms of economic resources, but also in terms of intellectual resources.

Gates and West agree that for poor Black and Brown children to be conceived as integral to the public interest, middle class Blacks must not abandon them. Rather, middle class Blacks must be reminded of the common interests between the Black middle class, upper middle class, and the "black people stuck behind" (Tatenhaus, 2004, p. 3); they must be persuaded that all Blacks will benefit if wealth is redistributed. In like manner, First Nations novelist Lee Maracle (1996) reminds First Nations people who have achieved class privilege that the majority of our people have not. She adds, "To object to racism or sexism without challenging oneself, whether we are white or coloured, is to deny privilege. All of those with privilege are expected to 'pass.' Many of us accept privilege without challenge" (p. 175). Maracle, I suggest, alludes to that first coalitional frame, taking up conflict within the self to have a positive impact on the intra-group and ultimately, the inter-group contexts.

Gates emphasizes that the dilemma for Black students is dealing with the conflict between excellence and community. The continued popularity of historically Black colleges such as Spelman College and

Brown University, two highly rated schools, attests to a desire for both excellence and community. However, such institutions also represent locations where, as Tatum (2004) points out, students from diverse backgrounds may engage in "between group" dialogue, as well as "within group" dialogue. Even in Black colleges, she argues, it is not only possible but also essential to create opportunities for both kinds of dialogue. Although faculty of all colors at Ivy League schools encourage students to be multicontextual, West (in Tatenhaus, 2004) sees nothing wrong with Catholics spending time with Catholics, Blacks spending time with Blacks, but emphasizes that "you don't want to get locked into that one context" (p. 2). These scholars recognize the importance of community for students of color to spend time with those like them, yet recognize that to be exclusive means that opportunities to dispel misconceptions and assumptions beyond the insider community are lost.

In his essay, "The College Experience of Native Americans: A Critical Analysis," Tierney (1993) interviews Delbert, a Native American college student, to highlight some aspects of Indigenous ways of being that are often misunderstood, including the lack of awareness of the importance of community, and the failure to understand that "Indian people love staying around and being on the reservation, at home" (p. 311). Delbert emphasizes that it is a struggle to come to the university. Instructors, he suggests, need to come to the reservations to see the bonding that takes place. Then, perhaps they would not try to make Native Americans something they are not. Delbert, then, articulates another criterion for coalition building, which, I argue, is the reciprocal exchange between groups, that is, the recognition that mainstream society has as much if not more to learn from Native peoples.

Selena Roberts (2001), in her *New York Times* article "Off-Field Hurdles Stymie Indian Athletes," discusses how colleges have virtually abandoned recruitment of Native American basketball players. Most recruiters resort to stereotyping when talking about the lack of success of Native American athletes. One coach suggested that "they," meaning Indian students, would rather rely on welfare checks and stay on the reservation than pursue basketball careers. But the issue is more nuanced than that. Some potentially top players who do wish to pursue such careers feel sabotaged by their community members, which Roberts

compares to a "crabs in a bucket" mentality. That is, instead of helping their youth pursue different life paths, some community members zealously attempt to hold them back, even at times resorting to threats of alienation. And there is often jealousy of those who achieve stardom. As one student interviewed by Roberts revealed, "It's hard when I go home for summer break. They look at you differently. They think, 'Oh, you're better than us'" (p. 17). This student addresses an issue that is not uncommon in Indigenous communities, given that scholastic success is still relatively uncommon and unfamiliar.

One of my research participants, Doreen, also had to deal with criticism from her family members. The notion of a family member becoming a PhD is so foreign to them that Doreen's successes sometimes trigger criticism, rather than compliments. She explains,

I've always felt very sensitive about being criticized. And I think you have to just let it go. There are going to be people that will criticize us in any position at any point. Oh well, what can you do? It's also cultural a little bit too because I can just hear family members saying, "Oh, she thinks she's so good. She thinks she is so fancy. She thinks she's so smart. What does she really know?" And you know what? A lot of people in my family or community might say that, but they never had the opportunities that I've had, and they're angry, and they should be. (Doreen's interview, April 16, 2003)

And, as Doreen alludes, the implications of colonizing policies and legacies have had far greater implications for some Native people than others, including those who have born the burden through intergenerational experiences.

My argument here is that no set pattern exists to explain how or why some Indigenous people choose to remain in their communities or to venture outside, who choose to join First Nations graduate cohorts or mainstream programs. But, as the basketball coach at Montana State (Roberts, 2004) suggested, unlike the inner-city youth who is frequently heard to say, "I want to get out of here," you will rarely hear Native American youth say that. If Native Americans are to be at all understood, for example, coaches and educators need to be receptive when Native American basketball recruits make requests to attend tribal ceremonies and the like, and to provide a sense of security for Native Amer-

ican students that extends beyond the basketball court. As Narayan (1988) notes, groups with heterogeneous components must take the time to talk about how people may be damaged, intentionally or unintentionally, because non-members of the oppressed group violate the sense of self of the oppressed group. In short, discriminatory practices must cease and American Indians must be freed to "speak their [own] narratives of liberation" (Tierney, 1993, p. 317) and not be required to reflect the mainstream values. For Indigenous people, as Delbert makes clear, success is not necessarily defined by the same standards as those of many members of the dominant society. Other scholars make clear the responsibilities inherent in Indigenous peoples' ways of being as these responsibilities relate to cross-cultural communication and, indeed, coalition politics.

Indigenous peoples can choose not to continue to follow a philosophy of the "Other." Rather than getting lost in the everydayness of Eurocentric culture and its philosophical framework, Indigenous peoples are reminded to embrace who they are and not give in to what are for them the inauthentic ways of the dominant society. There is a dearth of information about American-Indian philosophy made available to members of the dominant culture to include in course syllabi. Sharing stories and philosophies with members of the dominant society is a starting point if First Nations people are to effect change within academia, and for academics to see First Nations people as anything but the stereotypical silenced Indian presence. Further, as Heidegger (1962) clarifies, what we are is "being," as is how we are, including everything that we talk about and all ways in which we comport ourselves.

Without using the term "being," Hanna, a research participant, described a First Nations perspective. She said that what is important is "looking at what they value, how they live their lives, and I think the more we learn about other people and their culture, their traditions, what they practice, I think the more open we become as human beings." She added that there was never the phrase "to teach" in Aboriginal languages, rather, the expression "to show." And the way to do that, she clarified, is to be a role model. For example, "elders showing our children how to be respectful, how to value other people. They didn't just talk about it, they lived it, and they walked their path."

Barbara, another research participant, saw herself as having drifted back onto the path of discovery of who she is as an Aboriginal woman, and is not about to give way to a dominant colonial hegemonic ontology. In referring to her strong sense of self, Barbara stated, in words very similar to those of Keating (2002) and Verney (2004), "It reaffirms to me that people everywhere are searching, that they need the healing tools that we have to offer. They need the ways in which we view the world. They need to learn some of the things we know, our ways of being and ways of interacting with the universe." She chooses not to be "Other," and in doing so she fully embraces her "Nativeness" rather than viewing it as "less than." She makes clear that Aboriginal people have much to offer the dominant society through their worldviews, offerings that must be validated if meaningful coalition building is to take place.

THE CHALLENGES OF COALITION WORK

I used to cross a trestle bridge near the Boardwalk until a winter storm demolished it. Recently, I watched the workers rebuild this historic landmark, leaving intact some of the original foundation but supporting it with heavy buttresses and integrating it with other new materials . . . . Like the trestle bridge, and other things that have reached their zenith, it [the bridge spanning spaces between liminal worlds] will decline unless we attach it to new growth or append new growth to it. (Gloria Anzaldua, 2002, p. 2)

Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) notes that members of oppressed groups must be vigilant about not assuming that others cannot understand their oppression because they do not have first-hand, subtle knowledge of it. To make that assumption is to encourage their ambivalence. Oppressed peoples must also be prepared to acknowledge that any attempt to bring the margins to the centre necessarily implies that there must be movement from the centre to the margin. Coming to terms with such movement is difficult for those who have traditionally resided at the centre.

If those located at the centre of society are sincere about joining the struggle for social change, they must be willing to hear the stories from the mistreated, even if doing so makes them uncomfortable. By willingly engaging in open conversations about differences with those on the margins, non-members may recognize points of connection, or communalities without assuming that their own experiences, histories, and the like,

parallel those of others, without making it about them. Hanna spoke of the reticence of non-First Nations students in the School of Social Work to learn about Aboriginal experiences.

I think a lot of it has to do with talking about it and I know that a lot of the Aboriginal instructors at university bring in guest speakers just to talk about Aboriginal experience. It's interesting because I know that a lot of the non-Aboriginal students get really frustrated and they think, "I don't want to learn this. I just want to be a social worker." They know they're going to be working with First Nations people, but they don't want to take the time to learn about the culture and values. (Hanna's interview, April 19, 2003)

Giving something up and adding something new can mean recognizing that there must be greater representation of marginalized groups within the academy and in positions of power. It may also mean that faculty members, teachers, or paraprofessionals must engage in what Narayan (1988) terms "methodological humility" or "methodological caution" (p. 38), which means holding open the possibility that they may have missed something, whether that something is epistemological, pedagogical, or personal in nature. Outsiders must be willing to do their homework. Liz spoke to several of these requirements while referring to a high school context, among them the need for "more of us" in schools. She added:

And I guess there have been different ways that people thought would work, like with the support workers or the paraprofessionals. Maybe that is a bridge to where we need to get to, but those people need to have the training and the understanding in our epistemologies and pedagogy too, because sometimes I have seen situations where I think it is almost damaging to the students in the way that they approach their work. I guess they understand it has to do with how the students feel so they're giving them a break from the classroom by letting them come to an area of refuge in the school. But at the same time that's not helping them get through their courses; they're avoiding the work instead of trying to engage in it, and the support workers are letting the students avoid what they need to get through. (Liz's interview, February 26, 2003)

When asked for an instance that stood out as a safe discursive arena for cross-cultural communication, Sheila, a participant from an open

cohort, immediately spoke of the participants in the weekly sweat lodge ceremony who represented a range of ethnic backgrounds. She added, "There is listening to each other; we listen to each other and hear each other and that to me is real cross-cultural dialogue, that we are listening here (motions to the heart) instead of with our ears – the way you listen." In essence, she is talking about building coalitions.

Engaging in dialogue about race or difference with someone who is not Aboriginal, or from an "ethnic background," as she termed it, is difficult for Mary, unless that person has displayed interest in the topic and has done much research on it. As Mary, a vice-principal and a member of a closed cohort, said, "You'll know when they are open because they'll start the conversation." She suggested it is hard to be the conversation starter about issues of race or ethnicity because these comments will often garner such responses as, "Are you sure?" "Is that what really happened? Oh, maybe he just meant this." All are forms of denial, which serve to immediately shut down the conversation. Again, as Reagon (1983) pointed out, being an ally requires a willingness to hear the stories from the marginalized. For Mary there is a shared "sense of knowing" with other people of color, and forming such relationships is imperative because from time to time there is a need to vent, to realize, "Hey, we're in the same boat! We're sharing very similar types of experiences here!" "I'm not alone in this!" (Mary's interview, February 28, 2003). Mary is not suggesting that the experiences parallel each other; rather, she emphasizes the intersections.

Sometimes forming such alliances allows for survival, especially when few staff members and school community members are Aboriginal, or of color. Mary acknowledged that alliances could be formed even when someone does not understand, either intuitively or from lived experience, but continues to try to hear; it enables her to continue to try to dialogue. While sitting in meetings with a hostile teacher, for example, she finds it reassuring to see that the principal is trying to understand – "I get signals, body language, her comments, how she is willing to accommodate my situation, is trying to help me out, is trying to support me in whatever way she can." The principal was willing to sit down with her and try to do some problem solving, despite not really having "a sense of knowing." In this situation there was an implicit sense of trust.

Mary was willing to take the risk of making herself vulnerable in a situation where the principal clearly had more power than she did. Together they moved into that "Third space," that "no-man's-land" territory that Keating (2002, p. 519) refers to, that particular individuals enter for productive, dialogical, and intercultural encounters, where alliances are formed. The principal may be seen as acknowledging epistemic privilege as Narayan (1988) defines it.

For some students, certain non-First Nations instructors stood out as allies. Spurred on by a non-First Nations mentor's words of encouragement, Beverly took a leap into the unfamiliar and entered the world of theatre. That mentor, who became an ally, proved to be one of those life-altering individuals who simultaneously encourage and empower, without trying to alter the essence of who students are; rather, they embrace who students are.

Beverly was the only Aboriginal person in the theatre program when she was there, and, in her words, she didn't have "that cohortness," she didn't have the support that she had at the university cultural centre or the courses she took in Aboriginal studies. Individuals such as the mentor/ally that Beverly talked about were, to her mind, genuine and created safer places where, as she worded it, she "would not be denigrated or discriminated against." She felt that instructors such as this man respected her and valued her gifts. Clearly there was reciprocity in this relationship, where each learned from the other, and within that "interdependence of mutual non-dominant differences," Beverly found the security that enabled her to "descend into the chaos of knowledge" (Lorde, 2002, p. 107) and return with a vision for herself and the future she is shaping for herself and her people.

The following story represents the rationalist assumptions that Ellsworth (1991) argues must be dismantled. If relations of dominance in any classrooms are to be alleviated, relations that are so pervasive, that are the norm rather than the exception, such dismantling must take place and such stories must be illuminated.

Liz, who has worked on multiple curriculum development projects for the Ministry of Education, told of a conversation she had during a coffee break from one such project. This woman, who Liz described as well-educated and a leader in her province in curriculum development,

shared that she "just loved going to work at the legislative buildings because for her the legislative buildings really represented security, and it was something solid. It was something that really represented an organization, too, because if it wasn't there, what would it be like?" Liz's interpretation was that the legislative buildings became a metaphor through which she could express a binary opposition to the efforts being made for inclusion of an Aboriginal perspective in provincial curricula. In other words:

If it is not this orderly, controlled foundation then it is going to be something that is very wild and undesirable. I was noticing that she said that, 'Oh, I just love working for the government!' and 'I just love coming to this building made out of stone!' And it just represented civilization. She didn't say 'civilization' but that was what I inferred from what she was talking about. And I thought, "No wonder it is so hard to do this work with this group of people because that is her mindset." (Liz's third interview, April 16, 2003)

As Liz interpreted this woman's comments in the light of their work together, "it was either her perspective…or it was a really uncontrolled, wild, savage, primitive kind of perspective; [that is], if it was not her way of looking at the world in social studies and curriculum. But I don't think any of the other people noticed it." Liz's final statement, "But I don't think any of the other people noticed it," provides an example of how, as Narayan (1988) argues, outsiders are less able to make connections about what they know about oppression between one context and the next. Because they were outsiders they were less able to see that the woman's comments serve to perpetuate oppression, rather than contribute to its dismantling. Ironically, although Liz has been working to design courses where students are required "to grapple with conflicting yet overlapping worldviews" as Keating (2002, p. 521) recommends, and make connections as one way to avoid creating or perpetuating binaries or crevices between self and other, this curriculum developer seemed to be seeking to maintain the divide. Liz's reticence to speak, though, is, I suggest, understandable. She was the only Aboriginal curriculum developer on the team and, no doubt, she was familiar with passionate, thoughtful responses to such comments being perceived concomitantly as expressions of anger and thus rejected or if the retort is expressed in anger, the anger

is not understood. Lorde (1984) summed such responses up when she stated,

I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, "Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you." But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change? (p. 125)

However, I join Young (1997) in arguing that it is problematic to insist people enjoin another in thinking about issues from the perspective of others before drawing conclusions. I discuss Young's argument in relation to my concluding thoughts on coalition politics in the final section of this article.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS – A RECURSIVE PASS OVER KING'S ESSAY

Iris Young (1997, pp. 38-59)) argues that to systematize how individuals examine issues into a moral theory may lead to problems. She challenges Benhabib's (1991) concept of moral respect as a relation of symmetry between self and other and her suggestion that the perspective of self and others is reversible, indeed, symmetrical. Young's concept of asymmetrical reciprocity was developed as an alternative to Benhabib's to recognize the unique and particular history and social position that renders each person's relation to another asymmetrical. That is, one may take the perspective of another into account without taking her or his position. Persons aim to reach understanding through considering the multiple needs, interests, and perspectives of those represented without assuming reversibility, where differentiation among subjects is closed off. This matter is vastly different, she asserts, than imaginatively occupying their standpoint. In fact, she adds, it may be necessary to make explicit the impossibility of such a reversal to reduce the suspicions of white efforts (in the case of Aboriginal contexts) to take their standpoint. Mary, the participant whom I referred to earlier, hints that she values the stance of respectful distance that Young refers to in her relationships with her colleague and principal, where, by their actions and utterances, they implicitly acknowledge that they cannot reverse perspectives with Mary, but they can listen carefully across the distance, they can come to

understand her perspectives deeply. Productive dialogical and intercultural encounters and alliances can be formed.

Although participants in this research were reflecting on their cohort experiences as well as the challenges of intra-group and inter-group encounters primarily in formal educational contexts, their responses do have implications that extend beyond. In their stories the majority of the participants stressed the importance of dealing with intra-group tensions and differences while recognizing how essential it is to develop inter-group skills as well. Their experiences that led to a desire for membership in First Nations cohorts and contributed to the tensions have been significantly shaped, I argue, by the legislative policies that King (2003) refers to in the essay with which I began this article. The outcome of identity legislation, for example, has ongoing implications for Native people and contributes significantly to tensions and divisiveness within and between groups including what King terms "the uninformed public." Native peoples must name and address the origins and fallout of identity legislation so that we may counter termination legislation together. By working with those who are willing to work in a reciprocal while asymmetrical fashion with First Nations peoples, and while accepting that occasionally they must engage in epistemological caution – that is, as Narayan (1988) suggests, they must hold open the possibility that they may have missed something epistemological, pedagogical, or personal in nature, the public may become informed in greater numbers. By coming to recognize and take on what King (2003) referred to as the softer forms of racism with First Nations people, their likelihood of coalescing with us may be enhanced. We, then, may sing and dance and remind all of our interconnectedness.

NOTES

[1] The Indian Act is a federal statute that deals with Indian status, administers local government, and manages reserve lands and band funds.

[2] This article on coalition building is part of a larger study on First Nations cohort membership.

[3] In this article I use the term "First Nations" because the cohorts with whom I worked used that term to name their program (i.e., they were members of First Nations Master of Education programs), all of which were located in

universities on the west coast of British Columbia. I use the term Indigenous in reference to global contexts.

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Dolores van der Wey is assistant professor in the faculty of education at Simon Fraser University. She is of mixed Haida and Coast Salish ancestry. Her background has both informed and driven her current program of research in coalition and reparative politics in Indigenous education and in educational contexts generally. This work is inextricably linked to anti-oppression and anti-racism education and informs Dolores's teaching in both undergraduate and graduate programs.