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Commentary: “Inside Looking Out, Outside Looking In”

Steven Koptie

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In the Saturday, October 13, 2007 *Globe and Mail* (A27), Margaret Wente in the ignorance and arrogance of a full member of the colonizing government of Canada, inferred that our culture has no perspective on the suffering of our women and children. Every First Nation Social Worker understands the implications of this perspective. Before I tossed her newspaper commentary *White Guilt, dead children-in the name of political correctness*, in the trash, I suffered personal post traumatic stress effects from seeing in my mind the faces of lost women and young people no longer with us due to violence, suicide and community un-wellness. Early death of clients is a reality that every First Nations community worker painfully accepts as part of the job.

The following paper, *Inside Looking Out, Outside Looking In*, provides a response from a First Nation

woman and scholar, Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, PhD, and the title becomes a powerful metaphor for social activism in the First Nations cultural revival that Ms. Wente is clearly incapable of understanding. For me, Wente's inability to empathize and support, disqualifies her from having a meaningful role in the movement to heal our populations. Wente represents the unfortunate belligerence that constantly issues forth from political diatribes that maintain the oppression and suffering of our women and youth.

Like many Aboriginal activists, I have spent far too much energy debating with politicians and leaders who seem more interested in maintaining the historical status quo than creating movement towards resolution and reclamation of the immense strengths and resilience that far too often lie dormant and unrecognized in our communities. I have chosen to step out of that what has become an exercise in futility and join First Nation scholars such as Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux who give us a context and perspective to bring hope and change to some of the most vulnerable people on earth. We have decided to submit this commentary as an introduction to her paper on First Peoples alternative health and well-being because there is a need for our people to clarify not only understandings, but offer words of healing and truth of our own.

Having recently read an inspiring book written by Steve Biko (1978) who gave a great deal of thought to the question of white supremacy in South Africa and the quest for true humanity, I have concluded that Ms. Wente's rant is certainly incendiary if not racist. Biko's book, *I Write What I Like*, seeks to address attitudes deeply entrenched in ignorance and arrogance in dominant cultural norms that maintain injustice, suffering and cruelty that “careless” writers such as Ms. Wente perpetuate by blaming victims of historic atrocities for their predicaments. Biko speaks to the notion of

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metaphysical guilt and indifference to the suffering of South Africa blacks and I see a similar denial of complicity in government policies towards Canada’s First Peoples. White guilt for him was ownership by white society of the evils of oppression and domination, and, acknowledgement that it is their business to fix things, not the victims. Biko lamented, even in the 50’s, the time wasted by white liberals promoting integration and inclusion of the foolish, inferior and trusting oppressed, only to abandon them at a point of actual corrective social change. Biko offers a perspective on racial activism that merits careful examination by First Peoples social workers to enable them to resist mean spirited racially charged attacks such as Ms. Wenté’s.

First Peoples are generating resistance to the massive damage to their integrity by residual residential school fallout and family devastation all wrought by the spirit and intent of government policies and unscrupulous media. As a society we are not yet fully cognizant of the underlying oppression and genocidal intentions of white Canada openly being promoted in the name of nation building. The destruction of an entire population in the name of progress can only be understood when looked at in the context of total indifference to the planetary devastation of the past 25 years. First Peoples continue to protest Canadian global arrogance. This current government manifests a latent superiority that reveals masked hostility to any disruption of their total domination of Canada. Future generations will pay a huge price for this reckless and indifferent collective capitalistic greed. Ms. Wenté rationalizes racism by blaming victims for social problems, much like those who fight against a realistic accounting of privilege and overtly rationalize destruction of the planet.

It is a continuous struggle to bring awareness to social work practice about the truth of historic trauma and the intergenerational legacy that undermines the health and wellbeing of these communities. How do we address “the why” underlying these all too common experiences in our communities? Since 2006, I have brought people into the North whose roles are to do something about violence against women and children in Ontario, and we once attended to a community during the funeral for young man who had committed suicide, and whose death was directly related to dealing crack cocaine and gang activity in Thunder Bay, Ontario. One member of our team had international experience in the world’s most complicated conflict zones such as Bosnia and she later informed me that she was angry long after our visit because she had no idea that within Canada’s borders these conditions are allowed to exist.

I have endured almost 30 years of having to resist pressures to practice social work from a ‘dominant

culture’ framework. *Inside Looking Out, Outside Looking In* speaks to the stance professionals too often tend to take in their haste to “fix” Indians. I have lost more battles than I have won in my own efforts to bring flexibility to existing service structures. Dr. Wesley- Esquimaux offers insights into the need to alter those approaches by incorporating First Nations healing methods and alternative medical modalities that can also resonate in social work practice if entrenched in our communities.

Margret Wenté, by reducing such important debates to “white guilt” and “political correctness” trivializes the trauma First Nations social workers experience when they attempt to assist Aboriginal women and children. For this article, I am sticking to child welfare realities because the real and deeper tragedy of intergenerational family destruction is not yet well understood by the dominant society. Here I can offer some compassion towards Ms. Wenté. I cannot dismiss her identity as a (privileged) white woman, but I am saddened by her lack of respect towards the ongoing experience of First Nations women and children. However, together we have a complex interwoven history that requires us to appreciate the realities of our current relationship.

As a community worker, I have had to convince women to give up custody of their children in very difficult situations. One successful intervention was made especially painful when I read months later that this mother, having decided to place her infant in care in hopes of going for treatment, was found dismembered in a Toronto dumpster in Regent Park. My only comfort was that I had followed the guidance of community elders who had pressured me to engage each mother individually and encourage them to make decisions that were empowering and offered hope. This was in opposition to most of the practices of the Catholic Children’s Aid, who in the elders’ opinions, sought mainly to rescue Indian children from their families, and expressed little or no interest in ending the genocidal policies that had evolved from a legacy of residential schools and the sixties adoption scoop.

As a First Nations social worker I have had to establish trust and special kinds of partnerships because when I was not working, I could leave my office, but not my culture behind. Agency indifference to the identity of Aboriginal peoples and their specific roles, as well as the intrinsic cultural motivations we carry requires a great deal of research and discussion. For many of us, it makes it impossible to ‘sell out’ and it will require monumental paradigm shifts on behalf of child care agencies to acknowledge how differently Aboriginal women are being treated. The ideal is that this would be accomplished without major conflict, because in the end, and in the face of Wenté’s article, we are mostly left to the conclusion

that it is us who must abandon the notion that we can shift large agencies to examine their antiquated approaches.

A good example was challenging Colin Maloney's refusal to accept changes to the Ontario Child Welfare Act. The suggestion was that First Nations children were Catholic first, thereby making cultural requirements secondary to agency goals and objectives. The ensuing argument to reverse that this assumption was reduced to a debate about my being a trouble maker, and focused on my return accusation that his Jesuit background prevented an earnest discussion on cultural genocide. Neither argument being of any assistance to the issue at hand; amendment of the Act to honour the cultural needs of First Nation children.

I have had to personally launch a major Human Rights case in order to defend the rights of First Nation women to access services and resources that could bring healing and cultural survival in the face of a dominant society that fails to account for its own history of oppression and genocide. I have been left with little patience for liberal non-Natives who claim they are not racist, yet continue to avoid difficult community work, and refuse to contribute to properly training First Nation social workers. The suggestion is that we lack certain forms of 'clinical' expertise, which non-Natives have received from their formal educations. There is no real recognition of the cultural practices that inform our community discourse and relevant healing modalities.

On November 12, 2007, at the University of Toronto, Donald Worme spoke on combating hatred in the 21st century. His paper, entitled "*Hate: What does it look like? What does it feel like?*" raised issues of love and respect. In contrast, in my humblest opinion after almost 30 years of social activism in First Peoples communities, Margaret Wente's rant fit every category of hateful ignorance and arrogance that contributes to strained relationships between whites and First Peoples victims of Canadian historical, political and social traumas. This is inexcusable and cannot be justified, especially in the 21st century. The real indignation is that Ms. Wente's article is meant for the majority of Canadians who have a grade four or at best grade six level of education on the actual history of

Canada and its relationship with its First Peoples.

Unfortunately, most social workers share the same misinformation and all too frequently blame the "poor Indians" for not being "model" citizens. That Mr. Worme's work gets little media attention or we learn so little about agents of change like Mr. Biko calls for a higher level of education that can create real awareness and sustainable change. First Nation community workers must rise above poisoned messages doled out in media and share resistance and resilience stories for the healing required to re-assert our place on this continent. If we waste our time worrying about mainstream guilt and indifference, we lose the momentum of our ancestor's determination to not be completely destroyed by the evils of colonization and oppression.

There are many stories that articles such as that by Margaret Wente illustrate all too well. However, First Peoples today are determined to research, write and teach a different perspective in order to reverse the social and familial decline of our people. Gaining access to the writing of First Nations scholars like Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux provides a different context in which to frame the work of a newer generation of social workers. Many of whom feel the urgency of changing the perspective of their own people as well as representative agencies, even while preparing the next generation of social and community workers. To the Margaret Wente's of the world, I end with a request to get ready and to get out of the way!

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