Chapter XXVIII
Indigenous Knowledges and Worldview:
Representations and the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how representations of indigenous peoples on the Internet and other media are contextualized according to an outsider worldview, and that much of the information about indigenous peoples accessed through virtual media lack the original context in which to position the information. This means that the information is completely distanced from the indigenous peoples whom the information is purported to represent. This is problematic when representations of indigenous peoples are defined by dominant discourses which promote bias and reinforce stereotypes. With the increase of technology and the race to globalization, symbols are being reconstructed and redefined to connect and create a global identity for indigenous peoples. The consequences of this further the current practices of erasing and reconstructing indigenous history, language, culture and tradition through control and commodification of representations and symbols. This removal from history and community ensures continued silencing of indigenous voices. Although these misrepresentations continue to frame the discourse for indigenous peoples in Canada, it is time for indigenous peoples to reclaim and resist these representations and for outsiders to stop creating social narratives for indigenous peoples which support western hegemony.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous representations based on an indigenous worldview have historically been under the control of indigenous peoples; for example, picture writings or pictographs, recorded histories on skins, birch bark, pottery and rocks reflecting oral histories. Story-telling, myths, legends, songs and ceremonies are the means of ensuring indigenous knowledges are passed from one generation to the next. Recorded histories of indigenous peoples are found throughout the world (Mallery, 1972). Today, contemporary indigenous artists continue to engage in representational practices not only to record current and historic events but to critique political realities and as forms of personal expression. Artists use many modern means of expression such as canvas, paper, sculpture, film, photography, radio, music, electronic media and the Internet. Other indigenous artists continue to use more traditional art forms (beading, leather work, porcupine quill work, etc.) as forms of healing and expression.

However, others, both indigenous and non-indigenous, use these potentially expressive forms to supply a trade market in more imitative practices. This result is in the loss of control of representation of distinct indigenous nations across North America and globally. These representational practices may impact public perceptions of what it means to "be Indian," and project images that have been broadly adopted to generalize misrepresentations of all indigenous peoples. Consequences of these representational practices, which are ongoing in Canada, include erasure or reconstruction of indigenous histories, languages, cultures and traditions. Canada has continued to use romanticized representations of "Indians" as commodities of entertainment (Iseke-Barnes, 2005) and to support the Canadian national identity of being connected to the land (Mackey, 2002). This has been primarily systemic and rooted in all levels of society (vertical and horizontal, internal and external as well as within and outside communities and nations), including the national government (Adams, 1999). In media and popular discourse, indigenous peoples have been represented by non-indigenous peoples as culturally inferior and unable to provide for themselves. These representations function to strengthen Canada's right to define who is and is not Canadian and to control what can and cannot be considered indigenous (Doxtator, 1988).

Representations of indigenous peoples and practices are being reconstructed and redefined to create a global identity through the increased use of technology and in the race to globalization. Systemic representational practices, such as those described above, may be accelerated and their destructive outcomes broadened through the Internet (Iseke-Barnes, 2002; Iseke-Barnes & Sakai, 2003; Iseke-Barnes, 2005).

This chapter provides examples of resistance to colonial discourses by indigenous peoples but cautions that there are risks, with the increasing commercialization of the Internet, that dominant discourses might prevail. Readers are challenged to consider how representational practices contribute to growing problems, and also how they might be transformed in order to contribute to solutions.

COMMODIFICATION

When indigenous representations are taken out of their cultural context and interpreted through the dominant culture, interpretations will inevitably support the beliefs and biases in which the dominant culture communicates. This means that when one culture interprets another it generally obscures rather than clarifies meaning. "Native reality is grounded in the kaleidoscopic experience of being inscribed as subaltern in the history of others and as subject to one's own heritage. For Indians, these are placements built upon contradictory

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