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NEWSLETTER ON AMERICAN INDIANS IN PHILOSOPHY

FROM THE EDITORS, KATY GRAY BROWN & LORRAINE MAYER

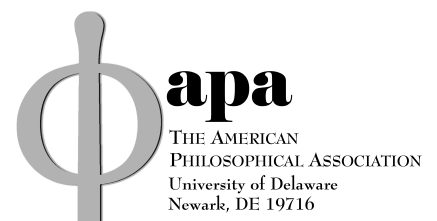
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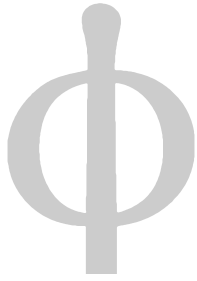
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FROM THE EDITORS

The Spring 2006 *APA Newsletter on American Indians in Philosophy* included a piece by Dennis McPherson, an Ojibwa scholar from Lakehead University's Indigenous Learning Program, titled "Indian on the Lawn: How are Research Partnerships with Aboriginal Peoples Possible?" McPherson's article was a reflection upon his experiences while engaging in action research at Lakehead University. McPherson acknowledged that his "...paper addresses systematic discrimination present within mainstream institutions which negatively influence the Aboriginal research agenda."

This edition of the *Newsletter* is devoted to responses to McPherson's piece, sparked by a letter to the editor from Richard Maundrell, professor in the philosophy department at Lakehead University. Maundrell provides a critique of the development of the Native Philosophy Project and a defense of the actions taken by Lakehead University.

Douglas Rabb, a former Lakehead philosophy professor, and Dennis McPherson are given the opportunity to respond to Maundrell's letter. We also present a First Nations student perspective with the inclusion of a reflection by Lorraine Mayer, a graduate of the Lakehead philosophy program.

The discussion in this issue further illustrates some of the challenges facing American Indian/First Nations scholars, their allies, and those institutions seeking to develop inclusive programs which are both respectful and sustainable.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Response to "Indian on the Lawn"

Richard Maundrell
Lakehead University

In an *APA Newsletter* article entitled "Indian on the Lawn" (No. 5, Vol. 2), Dennis McPherson accuses Lakehead University of systemic racism. It is not pleasant to be labeled "racist," even if the allegation is qualified as "systemic," because the implication has to be that we at LU are either vicious or doltishly insensitive. I believe that we are neither. It is not possible, of course, to prove that one is not racist, for one cannot prove a negative. But McPherson's allegations of racism are based on certain factual claims that I find false in some instances and seriously misleading in others.

As a long-term faculty member at LU, I would point out that the institution has gone to great lengths during the last two decades to accommodate Native students both academically and culturally. In addition to a Native Access Program, which is designed to help students of aboriginal heritage to make the transition to university study, there is also a Native Nursing Entry Program and a Native Teachers Education Program. Native students are supported by an Office of Cultural and Support Services, which employs the services of Native elders as counsellors, an Aboriginal Awareness Centre, and an Aboriginal Resource Centre and Lounge. The Faculty of Education houses a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Education, and the institution's administration includes a Vice Provost of Aboriginal Initiatives. Through the Aboriginal Management Council (AMC), Native representation is maintained on the University's Board of Governors and the University Senate. Contrary to McPherson's allegations that the AMC has no real influence on academic policy, the AMC maintains representatives on many committees involved in academic decision-making. For an institution with a student population of seven thousand, these initiatives represent a significant commitment to the development of an educational facility which is sensitive to the needs of Native students.

However, I would like to focus here on McPherson's comments regarding the Philosophy Department's graduate program in Native and Canadian Philosophy, which was introduced at LU in 1995 and closed six years later. He suggests that the decision to terminate the program was a function of the racism characteristic of LU as an institution. As chair of the Philosophy Department during those years, I was involved with the Native Philosophy program from its initial planning stages through the decision to close it.

At the time the program was launched, it was the first of its kind, and this was a point of pride for those who had worked to make it happen. Few in the world of academic philosophy had paid much attention to American Indian thought, and very little had been published in the area. Few, if any, philosophy departments had offered so much as an undergraduate course in the subject, so a graduate program with a focus on Native philosophy was quite a jump beyond what anyone had attempted to do before. Unfortunately, we were not very well equipped for the task. In 1995, the Philosophy Department at LU consisted of four full-time members. Only one, Douglas Rabb, had any serious research interest in the area, and even he had been a relative newcomer to it. LU's administration allowed the Philosophy Department to hire one additional faculty member on an eight-month contractual basis to help with the delivery of the program. This was to be the first of four such appointments before even this meager level of support was lost to a round of budget cutting. We knew from the start that the success of the program was going to be contingent on: (a) being able to hire and retain suitably qualified faculty, and (b) attracting enough students to justify further investment in resources with which to support it. As it turned out, neither of these conditions

were met. By 1999 we were reduced to our original faculty complement of four delivering a graduate program entirely on an unpaid overload basis. Applications dwindled and, in the end, diminished to a trickle. When we shut down the program in 2002 the decision to do so was entirely that of the Philosophy Department following consultation with the Deans of Graduate Studies and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. Many around the University, including colleagues and administrators, expressed their regret that the Philosophy Department had made the decision to close the program, but we had neither the means nor the will to continue.

While at no time did the Philosophy Department have adequate resources at its disposal to make the program work, other issues contributed in the end to its failure:

1. We were launching a graduate program in an academic field for which no undergraduate program existed at LU or elsewhere. This meant that we were attempting to skip a crucial stage in the development of an academic sub-discipline.
2. There was no consensus around the question as to what constituted “Native Philosophy.” This meant that it was not clear what the content of graduate courses in the subject would be, or what a reading list for a such a program would look like. In this respect it was, as one of my colleagues in the Department commented at the time, a “leap into the void.” Since there was no foundational literature from which to pursue scholarship in the area, doing work in American Indian philosophy was going to mean getting out of the library and doing fieldwork. But no one had a clear idea of what a graduate student in philosophy would be looking for out in the field or, indeed, where the “field” was. The traditional belief systems of North American Indian peoples can certainly be mined for ethical and metaphysical ideas. But the kind of beliefs maintained through oral tradition in the form of myths and stories were never intended to satisfy the demand for rational justification. In this respect, much of traditional Native thought is closer to the *Iliad* than it is to the *Euthyphro*. Perhaps this is why contemporary work in the area of Native philosophy is not as much about traditional worldviews as it is the reading of Western philosophical theory into Native culture. Thus, American Indians become deep ecologists, feminists, or process theologians. McPherson’s article is a case in point, as he makes his pitch for a Native philosophy as a transformative philosophy based on the work of Heidegger and Gadamer. (It would be interesting to see McPherson address the notoriously chauvinistic claim of Heidegger’s that philosophy can be done only in the Greek or German languages.) It is not racist to point out that the graduate program in Native philosophy faced difficult questions of method and content that were nowhere near resolution at the time the program was launched. After all, philosophy consists in the asking of such questions.
3. We knew that for the program to succeed we would need to hire additional faculty qualified in the area. It was not clear where these people were going to come from, however, for, even if the administration were to have given us carte blanche to hire whomever and as many as we liked, not many American Indians had a Ph.D. in philosophy, and none that we found had any immediate experience of Native culture. Those who had attained the kind of academic credentials that

normally constitute the basis for admission to the professoriate had not “lived the story” of life in a Native community. It would have taken a very special person to make this program work, and that person was not found despite repeated continent-wide searches.

4. It was not known what demand there might be for such a program.
5. It was not clear what the geographical or cultural scope of such a program would be. I am told that Canada alone contains over forty Native cultures, often with their own distinct languages or dialects, and it was clear that attempting to generalize in the direction of a Pan-Indian philosophy was going to be a non-starter.
6. No one immediately associated with the delivery of the program, including McPherson, spoke a Native language. If the aim in doing Native philosophy is to enter into the Native way of seeing and knowing, then it would seem imperative to do so through a foundation in language. This very important instrument for the exploration of Native thought was neglected for the duration of the program.

In short, we did not know at the time the program was launched the answers to the most basic questions of What? Who? and How? It should not be surprising, then, that the program ran into problems. When it was terminated in 2002, the best we could say about the experience was that we had conducted a noble experiment, albeit one which had failed. Perhaps if more resources had been available to us, things would have worked out differently. The modern university is a place of competing demands for limited resources. No one gets everything they need to build the world-class program of their dreams, and what they do get is contingent on enrollment. The truth is that there just was not much demand for this program, and, even if the demand had been there, we did not have the right people to deliver it.

Now, to some specific points that McPherson makes in “Indian on the Lawn” (quotations from “Indian on the Lawn” are in italics):

1. *The Masters in Native Philosophy was not cancelled for a lack of students. The year before the program was cancelled sixteen Native students applied to enter the program.*

At the time the MA program was launched it had the support, enthusiasm, and good will of the University community. In the first year of its operation several students were admitted to the MA program itself, while a larger contingent were admitted to a qualifying year in preparation for it. Things went wrong right from the start. Most of the students in the qualifying year dropped out of the program during the first semester and several of their number later called a roundtable meeting with the Department of Philosophy to discuss their experiences. Their essential complaint was that the program was “culturally inappropriate.” They had signed up for a program in Native Philosophy and found that they were expected to read Plato and Aristotle.

Since that is not an irrelevant complaint, I will address it briefly here. The program had been structured in such a way that both Native and non-Native students would be welcome in the program. Native students would be expected to fill in gaps in their background about the history of Western philosophy, while non-Native students would be expected to learn about Native culture. Those working in the area of Native philosophy would have to be able to communicate with those whose interests were more mainstream. Learning the basics of the history of Western philosophy would provide the means for bridging the cultural gap, and it would also provide graduates of the program

a better chance at success in a conventional Ph.D. program should they decide to continue their graduate studies later on. Complaints of this kind suggested to me that the program would likely have worked better as a Native Studies program with a philosophy component rather than as a pure philosophy program. In any case, these concerns were unwisely ignored. In subsequent years interest in the program flagged, and by 2001 applications had pretty much dried up altogether.

That is when we received a package of sixteen applications from a First Nations community: Couchiching, near Fort Frances, Ontario. What McPherson does not mention is that the applicants were not simply requesting admission to the program, **but they wanted it delivered to them at Couchiching: a distance of about three hundred road miles from Lakehead University.** This request was given serious consideration by the Philosophy Department, and a meeting was called with the Vice President Academic at which Rabb made a pitch for permission to hire an additional faculty member to make it possible. The request was denied.

2. My colleague, who was Graduate Coordinator for the Department of Philosophy at the time, tells me that the University decided to change the entrance requirements after the sixteen students had applied.

It is true that in the Spring of 2001 sixteen people applied for admission to the program in Native Philosophy from Couchiching First Nation (see #1 above). However, not one of the applicants possessed an undergraduate degree in philosophy at the time of application, which at LU as elsewhere would normally have been the basis for admission to a philosophy graduate program. They may have been considered for admission to a qualifying year in preparation for admission to the graduate program, but there are no fixed admission criteria for entry to a qualifying year. Thus, neither the University nor the Department could be accused of “changing” the admission criteria to serve a racist agenda. The Department never actually got to the point of assessing qualifying year requirements because it had already realized that it did not have the resources to deliver the program off-campus as had been requested. It is not true that the University did not “want” the students. My experience has been that universities these days pretty much “want” anyone who can pay tuition fees.

Some graduate programs allow for a form of qualified admission. A “qualifying year” prepares a student for admission to a program for which he or she either does not have the relevant undergraduate degree or where the undergraduate degree is viewed by the admissions committee as substantially deficient. Such admission is normally reserved for students who have done closely related undergraduate work. I know of no qualifying year program that is offered as a substitute for an utter lack of relevant undergraduate preparation. At LU the Philosophy Department was being asked to consider applications for a graduate program in philosophy from applicants who had yet to complete a single credit course in the discipline.

4. ...I am convinced that my colleague (Douglas Rabb) left in disgust...

McPherson is probably correct on this point. But, by the time Rabb took early retirement there was plenty of disgust to go around.

5. After my colleague resigned, I had some hope that he might be replaced by a Native philosopher in the Department of Philosophy... The University did replace him but with a Western philosopher...

Given McPherson’s avowed confusion about who or what constitutes “Native,” I would have thought that this would have been a non-issue. After all, if First Nations and non-First Nations

people alike have, as McPherson suggests, been filled with misconceptions about what constitutes an “Indian,” how are hiring committees to know that they are selecting the real thing? Three positions were filled by the Philosophy Department—two tenure-track and one limited-term contract—in the two years that passed following Rabb’s retirement. “Native Philosophy” was included as an area of specialization in our advertisements for all three. As it turned out, no one of Native identity submitted an application for any of these positions.

6. The Master’s Program in Native Philosophy was not cancelled for financial reasons. Though the Rockefeller Foundation institutional grant of a quarter million U.S. dollars is not normally a renewable grant, our Native Philosophy Project was judged so promising that...

McPherson seems to be suggesting that the Rockefeller Project was a source of financial support for the MA program in Native Philosophy. In fact, the Master’s Program was not linked in any way with the Rockefeller Fellowship program of which McPherson and Rabb were co-directors. The Rockefeller Native Philosophy Project was a post-doctoral fellowship program which was intended to bring visiting scholars to LU to carry out research related to aboriginal issues construed rather broadly as philosophical. Although it was certainly an excellent resource for students in the Master’s program while it lasted, money from the Rockefeller project was not and could not have been used for teaching purposes.

7. I am convinced by the record established at Lakehead University that such racism cannot be expunged, even by people of good will who genuinely want to do so.

The process by which a graduate program comes into being at LU is lengthy and complex. The proposal for a new program receives extensive review within the university before being forwarded to the Ontario Council for Graduate Studies, an office of the provincial Ministry of Colleges and Universities, for final approval. I submit that a program as poorly conceived and resourced as the Native Philosophy MA program had been would not have been approved in the first place, had it not been billed as “aboriginal programming.” I submit that none of the review bodies involved in the accreditation process wanted to say “no” lest doing so might be interpreted as racist. Unfortunately, the result was a program that, whatever symbolic value it might have had as “first of its kind,” proved to be academically and logistically untenable.

8. ...graduate program in Native and Canadian Philosophy which graduated two Native students (one Cree and one Ojibway) as well as some four or five non-Native students...; At the end of the day, the “Indian problem” in Canada is a “white problem”; ...the white guys will quite willingly bring everything to me...

When I read McPherson’s paper I wonder whether there might be some good old fashioned racism at LU after all. McPherson insists on reducing everyone according to the identity categories of “Natives” and “white guys.” Not only does it strike me as racist to insist on seeing and understanding the world in such a crude fashion, but it seems hopelessly outdated as well.

As for McPherson’s quarrels with LU administration over the disposition of AETS funding. I will leave it to him to decide whether it was worth walking a thousand miles because eight thousand dollars might have been misspent. And I will leave it to the courts to decide what is or is not “criminal.” I do know that his protest activities, which he now claims were part of an “action research” project—camping out on the lawn and walking to Ottawa—alienated a lot of colleagues whose support we needed to make our program work. As McPherson put it: *...people actually shied away from me as*

if I were contaminated... In 1995 there were some faculty members scattered around the University in such areas as history, anthropology, and political science who had been supportive of the program and who had offered their help as resources for our students. Their support was critical at that early stage of the program. However, as the late Richard Pryor once observed—following an incident in which he had accidentally set himself on fire—“when you are on fire, people get out of your way.” During the summer and early fall of 1995, McPherson was a man on fire. But people did not just get out of his way, they fled the program permanently. I would submit that no one did more to damage the MA program in Native Philosophy than McPherson.

ARTICLES

The Native Philosophy Project: An Update

Dennis H. McPherson
Lakehead University

J. Douglas Rabb

This update on the Native Philosophy Project is motivated in part by Richard Maundrell’s letter on “Indian on the Lawn” published in this issue of the *APA Newsletter on American Indians in Philosophy*. The editors were kind enough to invite us to respond to Maundrell’s letter.

The genesis of the Native Philosophy Project goes back to our first encounter when we (McPherson and Rabb) met as student and professor. At that time, Dennis McPherson, a social work student at Lakehead University, approached the Chair of Philosophy, Dr. Douglas Rabb, and asked, “Where would an Indian go to receive an education as an Indian?” Although the Philosophy Department did offer courses in both Eastern and Western philosophy, it did not offer courses in Native American philosophy, much less the Ojibwa philosophy for which McPherson was searching. After McPherson graduated with the only honors degree in philosophy Lakehead offered, he and Rabb collaborated to develop the first undergraduate course in Native Canadian philosophy, which they team taught.

This story is told in more detail in our book *Indian from the Inside: A Study in Ethno-Metaphysics*, which we wrote for the philosophy course in Native Canadian Worldviews as there were no such texts available. On the basis of this book and other research in this area by colleagues in other departments and ourselves, we obtained funding from the Rockefeller Foundation for our Native Philosophy Project, which provided \$250,000 to bring humanities research scholars to Lakehead University. The work with the humanities research scholars was so successful that the research grant provided by the Rockefeller Foundation was renewed, making the Native Philosophy Project at Lakehead University an unprecedented research endeavor as the grant is not normally considered renewable.

When, in 1994, we applied to the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) to offer our MA program on Native philosophy, we cited American historian Calvin Martin who argued that historians writing about Native history “have only the most rudimentary understanding of native phenomenology, epistemology and ontology” (Martin, p. 27). We argued that there was a real need for a better understanding of Native American philosophy, and that the proposed graduate program was being developed specifically to address this need. As we

had argued in our application to the Rockefeller Foundation, in 1993, we had very little idea what Native philosophy was or could be but that research using and developing philosophical methods could help us to find out. We believe that it was this honest approach, admitting to knowing that we did not know, which helped to win support from the Rockefeller Foundation. Our intention with the Graduate Program was to help students develop the skills and methodologies to better understand a Native worldview and delineate Native philosophy.

Contrary to Maundrell’s claim, the Masters program in Native philosophy was not “poorly conceived.” Nor was any attempt made to run it with a four-member philosophy department, only one of which had done any research in Native philosophy. As the Lakehead University Calendar makes patently clear, it was an interdisciplinary program in philosophy with well-published faculty across a number of departments including anthropology, history, political science, social work, education/native languages/linguistics, and indigenous learning. Like all graduate programs, approval of the Masters Program in Native Philosophy by the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies was dependant upon the assessment by departments at other Ontario Universities offering graduate programs in the discipline, in this case by philosophy departments of other Ontario universities offering graduate programs in philosophy. They provided very positive letters of support saying such things as: “the requirement for the degree seems sound and well conceived” and that the program should be “a welcomed addition within the Ontario system”; “the program is well thought out, firmly grounded in the core areas of the discipline, yet genuinely innovative”; “a new and exciting program.” We categorically reject Maundrell’s “assessment” of the program and prefer to follow the assessments provided by the various Ontario philosophy departments, as did the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies and the Ontario Council on University Affairs, both of which approved the program in 1995. Graduate programs in Ontario are required to go through reappraisal on a seven-year cycle. Our program was approved to commence in the sixth year of the philosophy seven-year cycle. Consequently, we went through reappraisal the following year, the year after we were approved to commence. In June 1996, the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies approved the program to continue and classified the program as of “GOOD QUALITY,” the highest qualification that the Council gives. Maundrell actually believes that our MA program in Native philosophy would not have been approved in the first place had it not been billed as “aboriginal programming.” He goes on to state, “I submit that none of the review bodies involved in the accreditation process wanted to say ‘no’ lest doing so might be interpreted as racist.” Maundrell is entitled to his opinion, but we suggest that he owes every philosophy department in Ontario, the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies, and the Ontario Council on University Affairs an apology.

We would like to thank Maundrell for making our case. We have argued that “Indians as Indians” are not really welcome at mainstream universities including Lakehead, which we have taken as a test case (McPherson 2006; McPherson and Rabb 1998-9, 1999, 2001, 2003; Rabb, 2002). We have gone so far as to suggest that “universities today are inadvertently completing the job of assimilation begun by the residential schools” (McPherson, Rabb 2001, p. 57). As Richard E. Robbins argues in *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*, “one of the most effective ways indigenous cultures have been modified...is through formal education” (277).

This problem has, of course, been identified by many other scholars. For example, one of our Rockefeller Foundation Visiting Humanities Research Fellows at Lakehead University

in the Native Philosophy Project, the late Dr. Viola Cordova, observed:

The contemporary Native American cannot speak, despite his life-long evaluation of Western ideas, actions, and goals. He supposedly lacks the critical and “abstract” skills for such an evaluation. Any attempt to say something about the dominant culture from another perspective is met with cries of, “You failed to understand!”—‘understanding’, in this circumstance, being synonymous with ‘acceptance’. Nor can the Native American speak for himself. He is plagued through “intellectual pollution” or, worse yet, he is “too subjective” to analyze his own culture. The Westerner, of course, never suffers from “subjectivity.” (p. 41)

Students in the qualifying year of the Masters program in Native Philosophy at Lakehead University certainly encountered this problem. Maundrell states they called a “round table meeting” to complain that the program was “culturally inappropriate.” He goes on to say, “they had signed up for a program in Native philosophy and found that they were expected to read Plato and Aristotle.” Maundrell missed the point. Actually, the students were complaining that they were not allowed to criticize or explain Plato or Aristotle in the light of their own Native worldviews. An Ojibwa interpretation of Plato or Aristotle is not that far fetched. For example, an internationally acclaimed novel by local author Joan Skelton attempts to do just that (p. 78). Her novel has since been expanded into a play in which the main character gives the following monologue about the Ojibwa water spirit Mishipishu.

The cave looked like a giant eye, an eyelash of icicles blinking down its forty foot depth. Exhausted, I lay down on the swirling rock jowl in front of this great eye. The feeling of the place came over me. I have always been sure it was a magic place for the Ojibwa who roamed here. They came to contact the spirits, the Manitou of the other world, their real world. For them, the physical world was only a reflection of the real world of the spirit. We call their philosophy primitive. In universities, the same thing is called the philosophy of...Plato. Hardly primitive! But, despite the non-reality of the physical world, the Ojibwa treated it with reverence. The only thing revered by the white man is money. And sex. And power. “Dominion over the fowl of the sea, and over the fish of the air...” Oops. Fish of the air? You know what I mean. Mishipishu... (Magnus Theatre, 2007)

Richard Robbins, following John Bodley’s *Victims of Progress*, argues in some detail that indoctrination through education is a final stage in the various steps through which nation-states act “to transfer the rights of resources from indigenous peoples to settlers wishing to exploit the resources for themselves” (273). It is little wonder, then, that a program encouraging Indigenous people to research their own philosophy and regain a sense of their own identity would not be a priority of mainstream universities in North America. Maundrell’s letter certainly corroborates the claims made in “Indian on the Lawn” that Lakehead University, quite simply, had other priorities. We would add that when the Graduate Program in Native Philosophy was approved by the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies, one of the Rockefeller Foundation Visiting Humanities Research Fellows, Dr. Gordon Christie (Inuit), had extended his stay through a limited contract teaching position. It was understood by OCGS in its approval process that this position would become tenure track. The most the University ever provided were two successive one-year sabbatical replacement

contracts, filled in turn by Dr. Lee Hester (Choctaw) and Dr. Anne Waters (Seminole, et al.). Maundrell fails to mention that had the University not closed the MA Program in Native Philosophy when it did, it would have faced the regular seven-year-cycle reappraisal process of Ontario Graduate Programs. The Ontario Council on Graduate Studies would certainly not have approved the program to continue without a tenure-track position filled by a Native faculty member the University had assured OCGS would be provided. To put it bluntly, the Lakehead University Philosophy Department would have been embarrassed to face a reappraisal of its Masters Program in Native Philosophy given that the University so obviously had other priorities.

It should be noted that we are not saying that Lakehead University does not want Native students. Of course, like every other university in Canada, it welcomes Native students, particularly those that are Status Indians. Such students are fully funded by the Federal Government. In Canada, according to the Constitution, education is a Provincial responsibility. However, “Indians, and Lands Reserved for Indians” is a Federal responsibility. Besides funding the postsecondary education of Status Indians, the Federal Government also makes transfer payments to the provinces earmarked for special costs associated with Native students (special councilors, Elders, upgrading courses, and the like). The Federal Government also covers the additional costs of travel to and from remote Indian Reserves both for students to leave home, and for faculty to deliver off-campus (distance education) courses to Indian reserves where there is sufficient demand. We note in passing that all sixteen students who had applied to the qualifying year of the MA in Native Philosophy were Status Indians (one already held an earned Ph.D). The Federal dollars they would have brought with them would have more than covered the cost of the additional faculty needed to deliver the requested program on the Indian reserve, which as Maundrell notes is “about three hundred road miles” from campus. Program delivery to distant Indian reserves is not all that extraordinary. We have both, as have many other faculty members at Lakehead University, offered courses in reserve settings for some time. In fact, McPherson, as do many others, continues to deliver two to three such courses a year. We consider it an integral part of the Native Philosophy Project as well as a contribution to community development. We see the number of such on-reserve university level courses growing as more and more Native students, particularly Status Indians, complete their graduate degrees.

Our experience thus far with the Native Philosophy Project has made us wonder why anyone on an Indian Reserve would want courses provided by a mainstream university. As Marie Battiste (Mi’kmaq) and Sa’ke’j Henderson (Chichasaw) argue at some length in *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge*: “Canadian educational systems view Indigenous heritage, identity and thought as inferior to Eurocentric heritage, identity and thought” (88-89). All of the courses Maundrell lists in his letter as making the University Indigenous-friendly are Native access courses, essentially upgrading courses, so those Native students requiring them can gain the skills needed to enter the regular mainstream courses the University offers in nursing, engineering, arts, science, and so forth. Métis historian Howard Adams may put the point a little strongly in arguing that “all of these courses indoctrinate Native students to conservative middle class ideologies. They are orientated toward creating an Aboriginal bourgeois. ...In short...giving some benefits of the dominant society to a small privileged minority of Aboriginals in return for their help in pacifying the majority” (Adams 1999, 54). Nevertheless, he is getting at a real issue here, as are Battiste and Henderson. All three are drawing on years of experience teaching at universities

in both Canada and the United States. Their experience confirms our own, which we have outlined in more detail elsewhere (McPherson and Rabb 2001, 2003). Again, Maundrell's letter serves as a nice, simplified illustration.

One area of Aboriginal programming at Lakehead University Maundrell fails to mention in his letter is the Native Language Instructors Program (NLIP) together with the large number of courses in Ojibwa and Cree in the Native Language and Linguistics programs. These are world-class programs helping to preserve the Cree and Ojibwa languages. We would not have been able to mount the MA in Native philosophy without these programs and their uniquely qualified faculty and instructors. They helped us develop the Language Requirement for the Masters Program in Native Philosophy. We needed to accommodate both students whose first language was one of the many Native languages of North and South America, as well as students with little or no knowledge of a Native language. Since the program was basically a Thesis Degree it was decided that "students writing a Thesis on Native Philosophy must demonstrate an acquaintance with at least one relevant Native language" (*Lakehead University Calendar* 1995-6, p. 218). To accommodate students whose first language was not a Native one, the Department of Native Languages/Linguistics provided a full year course: "Students may meet the Native language requirement through successful completion of NL Linguistics 2711 – Introduction to Native American Linguistics" (*Lakehead University Calendar* 1995-6, p. 218). We had made provision for a language testing committee made up of McPherson and the head of Native Languages/Linguistics and/or his delegate, but it turns out that everyone who went through the Native philosophy graduate program opted for the course, Introduction to Native American Linguistics, to satisfy the language requirement. One of our students, Leslie Nawagesic, explained that he knew he could talk in Ojibway but he was not sure he could talk about Ojibway, and he wanted to take the Linguistic course to learn more detail about the structure and history of the language, and to compare it to other Native languages. Nawagesic has recently received a publishing contract for his Master's thesis thanks largely to Anne Waters.

We have described the features of the language requirement for the MA in Native philosophy taking the extraordinary measure of actually citing the Calendar entry because Maundrell, in his misguided effort to characterize the program as "poorly conceived" says the following: "If the aim in doing Native philosophy is to enter into the Native way of seeing and knowing, then it would seem imperative to do so through a foundation in language. This very important instrument for the exploration of Native thought was overlooked for the duration of the program." Now, why would Maundrell say, "This very important instrument for the exploration of Native thought was overlooked for the duration of the program"? Why would Maundrell make such a blatantly false statement? The most charitable explanation we have been able to come up with is that we are faced with the chairman of a department who is so indifferent to the Graduate Program offered by his department that he does not even know that it has a language requirement. This, we submit, is a perfect illustration of the kind of indifference Native students face at mainstream universities.

There are numerous ways in which both Native students and Native faculty can be made to feel invisible at mainstream universities. We will give one brief example to illustrate. It is related to the teaching and preservation of Native languages. As part of our ongoing research in the Native Philosophy Project, in October of 1997 we presented a paper at a major national conference hosted by our own university, the 29th Conference of the Algonquian Society. In our paper we drew upon the

recent study by philosopher David Abram entitled *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* to suggest that there may be problems with the use of phonetic writing systems, such as syllabics, to preserve Native American languages and cultures (McPherson and Rabb 1999). Abram, himself, asks, "If human discourse is experienced by indigenous, oral peoples to be participant with the speech of birds, of wolves, and even of the wind, how could it ever have become severed from that vaster life?" (91). Abram's answer has to do with the development of phonetic writing, the Hebrew aleph-beth, the Greek alphabet.

The participatory proclivity of the senses was simply transferred from the depths of the surrounding life-world to the visible letters of the alphabet. ...[E]ach letter was now associated purely with a gesture or sound of the human mouth. ...The senses that engaged or participated with this new writing found themselves locked within a discourse that had become exclusively human. Only thus, with the advent and spread of phonetic writing did the rest of nature begin to lose its voice. (Abram, 138)

In our presentation to the Algonquian Conference we simply pointed out that if Abram is right then the use of syllabics to write Algonquian languages purely phonetically runs the risk of severing the language from the land. We argued that, just as Abram shows, over the past 2,000 years we (Euro-western society) had done it to ourselves; now, with the introduction of syllabics, a non-Native technology, we (Euro-western society) are in danger of doing it to the Native peoples of North America. Our paper generated considerable discussion (read major uproar) as the Algonquian Society is the major national association of Native language teachers from all across Canada. These are people who make their living teaching syllabics. They believe that in doing so they are preserving Native language and culture. The discussion centered around hoping Abram, whose book had just come out the preceding year, was wrong. We are not committed to everything Abram says as can be seen in the paper by Lorraine Brundige (Mayer) and Rabb with the intriguing title, "Phonocating Mother Earth: A Critique of David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*." Still we do think that Abram is on the right track and this does raise important philosophical questions about the use of syllabics to preserve Native language and culture.

The summer after we raised this question before the 29th Algonquian Conference, thus stimulating discussion right across Canada, our own university, in an effort to be student-friendly, erected numerous signposts on campus pointing directions to the Library, Student Centre, various academic buildings, and so forth. On each and every post directly below the English sign was another written in syllabics. Syllabics also appeared on a new sign at the main entrance to the University. This was a perfect bureaucratic and, we felt, extremely amusing rejection of our thesis. It came as a complete surprise to us. No one had consulted us as researchers in the Native Philosophy Project. No one had consulted McPherson or anyone else in the Department of Indigenous Learning, the main academic unit dealing with Native students and research on campus. Had we been asked, we would no doubt have shared our concerns, but we probably would have told them to go ahead anyway, since we do recognize that our thesis is a controversial one. Besides, the syllabic signage is another nice illustration of the facade of friendliness Native students encounter at Lakehead and other mainstream universities. We must not forget that including syllabics makes it permissible to use funding earmarked for Native education to defray the costs of such campus enhancement projects. Unfortunately, such

projects do nothing to ameliorate the inherently assimilationist tendencies built into the system. It is also the case that there are those who would happily argue that Indians should assimilate, that this is the only way they are going to succeed. We believe that giving up who you are in order to “get ahead” is a sign of failure, not success.

We are, in fact, very optimistic. We believe mainstream universities can change, or, rather, can be made to change, as more and more and more Native students complete graduate studies and become members of faculty. However, change will never happen so long as Native faculty members remain invisible. There is, and will always be, tremendous pressure on them to “blend in,” to assimilate, to stay quiet, and just try to get along. It takes courage and sacrifice to stand up and say NO to assimilationist policies. It takes courage and sacrifice to stand up and say, “Being Indian is being different and that difference is something to be proud of!” This is just what “Indian on the Lawn” was all about. Lakehead University was our test case because it was, and is, one of the most progressive universities in North America. Yet, even this most progressive of universities failed the test. When confronted with an Indian faculty member who said NO; who said in effect, I am Indian, I am different, accommodate me and my Indian students, don’t make us fit into your system, the university simply did not know how to cope. While sitting on the Lawn in front of the main administration building this Indian was visited by many faculty members, administrators, members of the University’s Board of Governors, and, of course, Native students and community members who brought food, blankets, and so forth to show support. For some members of the nearby Fort William Indian Reserve who came to show support, it was their first time on campus.

One faculty member who never came to the Indian encampment on the Lawn was Richard Maundrell, even though it was his Department which offered the Masters program in Native philosophy at the time. In his letter concerning McPherson’s “Indian on the Lawn” Maundrell proclaims, “I would submit that no one did more damage to the MA program in Native Philosophy than McPherson.” On this one point we agree with Maundrell. The University was simply unable to respond in any meaningful way to McPherson’s challenge. So in this case Maundrell finally got something right. However, we would ask, by way of conclusion, is being right in this particular case something to be proud of?

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What Happened at Lakehead: The Dilemma of Racism, Corruption or Incompetence?

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I graduated from Lakehead University in 1997 having received a Masters Degree in Canadian Native Philosophy. I am personally acquainted with the scholars whose concerns have been published in this issue of the *Newsletter on American Indians in Philosophy*. “Racism,” “incompetence,” curious words, both of which elicit emotional reactions that differ depending on whether one is being accused of discriminating against a

racial group or feeling the effects of racism. Similarly, the word “incompetence” also elicits strong reactions depending on whether one is being accused of incompetence or levelling the accusation at another. These two highly charged words lie at the bottom of a controversy that began many years ago at Lakehead University in Canada.

Initially this paper began as a brief response to a letter Katy Gray Brown and I received as co-editors of this *Newsletter* from Richard Maundrell, a philosophy professor at Lakehead University. Maundrell was writing in response to an article the co-editors previously published by another Lakehead professor, Dennis McPherson.

But each time I started to write I found myself in emotional turmoil and as I began to write, my brief response evolved into this paper. I found myself caught between these professors, both of whom were my teachers from my first years at university to my completion of the Master’s Degree. To side with McPherson would be acknowledging the depth of institutional discrimination occurring at Lakehead, but also tantamount to calling Lakehead and the Philosophy Department racist, for as Maundrell writes: “It is not pleasant to be labelled ‘racist’ even if the allegation is qualified as ‘systemic’....”

Inevitably, I found myself disagreeing with Maundrell. Firstly, I had problems with his understanding of systemic discrimination simply because he claims that using the term “systemic” is no less than “the implication has to be that we at LU are either vicious or doltishly insensitive.” Systemic discrimination is when a standard or criterion is used which has “an adverse impact upon an identifiable group that is not consciously intended.”¹ To dismiss charges of systemic discrimination so blatantly by using additional emotionally rousing words is to indirectly allow the continuance of the discrimination. Given the clarity of the definition of systemic discrimination, it is obvious that McPherson is challenging the “standard” at Lakehead which has had a negative impact of Aboriginals, and it is equally obvious that Maundrell is defending the “standard.”

Maundrell’s strict adherence to the “standard”—in other words, a Western institution’s educational requirements—was highlighted when he argued the need for studying Plato and Aristotle because “those working in the area of Native philosophy would have to be able to communicate with those whose interests were more mainstream.” He also argued that “...whatever symbolic value it [the Native graduate program] might have had as ‘first of its kind’, proved to be academically and logistically untenable.” The words “academically...untenable” pierced me quite deeply, since I took that same degree from Lakehead University and went on to complete a Ph.D. in Philosophy at the University of Oregon. Therefore, to side with Maundrell would be equivalent to dismissing the degree I earned (while also under his tutelage) as meaningless.

I realize that emotions run deep and intellectual accusations of poor scholarship, poor program development, and institutional corruption are at the heart of these letters. What happened at Lakehead is an important issue for philosophers since it raises the question of systemic discrimination to the level of experience as opposed to the level of theory, and forces us back to the ancient belief of Protagoras that there is no objective truth because the world is for each person as it appears to that person. Since there could be no objective truth, Protagoras taught his students the skill of making a weaker argument the stronger. Is this what happened at Lakehead? Clearly, both Maundrell and McPherson have radically different perceptions of what occurred, and arguably on each side of the controversy is a scholar well skilled in presenting arguments. What I have come to realize is that we have a potential for endless debates

and criticisms over what happened at Lakehead without any solution presenting itself.

For McPherson, an Ojibwa scholar, the controversy on a scholarly level first began in 1982 when he confronted the absence of Native philosophy in a discipline noted for its philosophical explorations into Greek philosophy, German idealism, and British empiricism as well as the Eastern philosophies of India, China, and Japan.² McPherson challenged the absence of Native philosophy at Lakehead University and set about to rectify what he and many others saw as an injustice within the education system—an injustice that would not be tolerated elsewhere. For example, imagine teaching in Britain and never mentioning the existence of British philosophy?

On a more personal level, however, the controversy for McPherson began long before his initial confrontation with the absence of Native philosophy in higher education. The absence was simply another reminder of the unimportance of Native people in the larger scheme of education and further confirmation of his life-long experience with racism and discrimination and the impact they have on Native people’s education.

For Maundrell the controversy began when the Philosophy department at Lakehead began to take McPherson seriously. Maundrell’s colleague, Doug Rabb, worked with McPherson to develop the first course in Native philosophy, *Philosophy 2805: Native Canadian World Views*, which led to the further development of the Native Philosophy Project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the first ever Native and Canadian Graduate program. The controversy for Maundrell culminated in McPherson’s article: “Indian on the Lawn: How are Research Partnerships with Aboriginal Peoples Possible?” The article came out in the *APA Newsletter on American Indians in Philosophy* (Volume 05, Number 2, Spring 2006).

McPherson’s objective with that particular article was to address “systematic discrimination present within mainstream institutions which negatively influence the Aboriginal research agenda.”³ Maundrell, however, balked at the idea of institutional discrimination at Lakehead and in a logically articulated letter proceeded to discredit McPherson’s experiences of discrimination. Maundrell has allegiance to both the University and his discipline; therefore, I question whether the accusation of institutional discrimination would have been problematic for him if not for the fact that McPherson was striking too close to home. Had McPherson simply articulated the problems inherent in systemic discrimination without giving specific details, in other words, without doing a complete expose, I do not believe Maundrell would have had a problem with the McPherson article. Maybe this is precisely the reason McPherson had to write as he did. The Western world of academe reigned for far too many years with the misperception that “objectivity” is indeed the mainstay of research. Native philosophers and other Indigenous peoples understand that Western philosophy is not value free. But, rather than attack or challenge value neutrality from an impartial stance, McPherson told the truth, he hit where it hurts, he did not theorize about the incidents, he revealed them.

Maundrell lists the programs designed to “accommodate Native students both academically and culturally” that Lakehead has initiated over the past few decades to demonstrate how McPherson’s claims are “false in some instances and seriously misleading in others.” Unfortunately, anyone can list programs developed since the 1800s that were ostensibly designed to *help* Native people. Nonetheless, the programs were initiated from across a cultural divide. The issue is not the fact that programs exist. Tokenism reveals the presence of Native programs or Native people as a justifiable way to deny racism/

discrimination. The real issue is who designed the programs, what worldview were they using, and how do they benefit the target populations?

During my years at Lakehead, I had occasion to speak with many other Aboriginal students on a daily basis. Yes, there were/are access programs but there were many faculty members who condemned the use of access programs and many non-Native students who responded with equal contempt. These attitudes were not lost on the Aboriginal students. Unfortunately, when issues of racism or discrimination are brought forth the person who does not have the painful experience will demand concrete examples. How does one give a concrete example without the other reacting? Not only that, but sometimes the examples are of a such an insidious nature that they do not allow for explanation, only an immediate gut reaction of hurt, pain, and disillusionment and knowledge of the presence of racism/discrimination. Examples of reactions to these types of attitudes are glaring in the article by McPherson and the response by Maundrell.

What I found most interesting was Maundrell's attempt to turn a necessary discussion about institutional discrimination back onto McPherson by claiming:

When I read McPherson's paper I wonder whether there might be some good old fashioned racism at LU after all. McPherson insists on reducing everyone according to the identity categories of "Natives" and "white guys." Not only does it strike me as racist to insist on seeing and understanding the world in such a crude fashion, but it seems hopelessly outdated as well.

Rather than addressing the reality of systemic discrimination, Maundrell neatly reverses the picture. If I were to accept his argument I would have to believe that every Native person whose primary use of the descriptive words "Native" or "white guy" is racist. Imagine the shock that would give to residents of northern reserves who live in abject poverty and are dependent on the political will of government, to hear themselves being labelled racist because they still use the words "Native" or maybe even "Indian" along with the ever present "white guy."

As for being outdated, well yes, we have many, many, new politically correct terms at our disposal—so much so that author Drew Hayden Taylor wrote way back in 1994, "Oh Just Call Me An Indian" to illustrate the length we all have gone to be socially polite.⁴ Yet, politeness does nothing to eradicate discrimination, it just gives the illusion that society is evolving in a good way. A Lakehead psychology professor once told me it would be impossible to talk to each other in the future because we were so concerned with politically correct terminology. I remember laughing but now I wonder if this will not be the case. I suppose we should assume that every non-Native person who still uses the word "Indian" is racist, as according to Maundrell they would be.

In Richard Maundrell's experience, what occurred at Lakehead was not racism or corruption but, rather, incompetence in the development of the Native Philosophy Project and the Native Philosophy Graduate Program. Indeed, he stresses in defense of his university that "I would submit that no one did more to damage the MA program in Native philosophy than McPherson." Again, it was with sadness that I read those words of complete condemnation. I knew why McPherson did what he did. I was there, too; I know the encouragement he gave to Native students who felt they could not go on any longer dealing with racism at Lakehead because I felt the same sense of defeat many times. I know how he discussed at great length

the need for Native philosophers. I was one of the first students in the program. I know he never gave up belief in my ability to go further and complete a Ph.D. nor in my responsibility to other Native students once I completed my education. I also know how he believed Aboriginal people deserved to be able to attend university and learn about who we are, who our ancestors were, and their way of being in the world that is independent from a European or Euro-Canadian interpretation.

To hear a man like this discredited simply because he chose to tell an experiential truth was very disappointing to me. To have read it from a man who had played a huge role in my being in philosophy in the first place was even more disappointing.

Within the world in which Maundrell walks, he cannot see what Aboriginal scholars/students see. He cannot experience the racism we live with for it is not his lived reality, nor is he willing to enter an Aboriginal reality; if he were he might see as we do. As far as damaging the Graduate program, I think Maundrell's own words say it all: "Many around the University, including colleagues and administrators, expressed their regret that the Philosophy Department had made the decision to close the program, but we had neither the means nor the will to continue." When examining privilege, the first thing I was taught was how the privileged can walk away when situations appear to be too much. The oppressed do not have the privilege of walking away. Maundrell can turn his back on a program, he can absolve his department and university administrators of any racism or discrimination, but he cannot change the fact that for Native people the privilege to chose, to create, to deny, still rests with his culture. Native people cannot afford to *not have the will*.

As for McPherson, I do not believe he damaged the program, but he cannot enter Maundrell's lived reality and simply dismiss notions of racism and institutional corruption because McPherson lives and breathes racism and its effects every day. He lives in a world where racism exists; Maundrell lives in a world where racism does not exist, at least not for him. He can understand it on an intellectual level but not the level where it destroys the soul and dignity of people. McPherson, like myself, has had to learn both cultural worlds in order to make sense of who we are and our place in this universe. Maundrell does not have to learn our world to make sense of his world. He does have to struggle in the same way we do to obtain funding, or to maintain funding. Which is why he can say, "we had neither the means nor the will to continue" without any sense of guilt.

Ironically, Maundrell admits to insufficient funding; however, no one seems to object to funding German Idealism or British Empiricism, neither of which have any relevance to the numerous Native students attending Lakehead University or the much needed solutions for economic development for Aboriginal peoples. But then why would any philosopher object? After all, these courses are part of the standard of philosophy and therefore not to be challenged. Maundrell has lost nothing by giving up the program. Native students, on the other hand, have lost an opportunity to discover, develop, and engage in Native philosophy. In a discipline that focuses so much energy around human rights one would think that Native students should be given the time and intellectual space to reflect critically on their own culture and its place in relation to the dominant culture. This kind of critical inquiry is something all students should be encouraged to take. Unfortunately, the cancellation of a Native philosophy program means that Native students are denied this opportunity.

How could Maundrell and others help Native students? The answer is simple. Why was Rabb, a non-Native philosopher, able to understand, appreciate, and agree with McPherson? Rabb

was not only willing but did indeed enter into the Aboriginal perceptual field. What I mean is he was willing to enter into enduring relationships with Aboriginal peoples. He watched us laugh, cry, struggle. He brought us into his home and shared his food with us. He allowed his world to be challenged. Maybe that is the most significant of all. Rabb was willing to move beyond the culturally relativist perspective of Western culture's supposed superiority in philosophy. He was willing to take a cultural, an intellectual, and an emotional risk.

I am not claiming that Rabb can live the racism of Aboriginal people. No one can but Aboriginal people. And even then the racism I experience may not always be the same as the racism McPherson may experience. But, by engaging in relationships with Aboriginal people Rabb has definitely taken a step in the right direction. He has allowed his perceptual field to broaden. Like a man chained in Plato's cave, Rabb knew there was something beyond the shadows of his world. He also recognized that he needed outside help to see beyond his perceptual reality.

I truly believe that using highly developed philosophical tools of analysis to attack/discredit each other perceptions rather than explore the reasons behind the differing perceptions is a futile endeavor and amounts to nothing more than taking a Protagoras route to making the weaker argument the stronger. Any further discussion or finger pointing will do nothing to change what happened at Lakehead. However, what happened

at Lakehead should not be dismissed because systemic discrimination is very real and requires serious philosophical inquiry.

The facts speak for themselves. When Maundrell leaves his house he walks into a world created by a Euro-Canadian picture of reality complete with the history of conquest, victory, and well-developed social political ideals. When McPherson leaves his house he encounters a world created not by his people, it does not tell his history, his victories, or his culture's social and political ideals. When they are discussed they are done so as relics of a best forgotten past. It is no wonder both see what happened at Lakehead in a different light, because in reality both are actually looking at it from a different light.

Endnotes

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