

Review: Reclaiming our Learning Spirit and Identity

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Tom *Sakokweni*nkwas Porter. *And Grandma Said...: Iroquois Teachings as Passed down through the Oral Tradition*. Transcribed and Edited by Lesley Forrester. Drawings by John Kahionhes Fadden. Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2008. Illustrations/images. IX + 441 pp. ISBN 978-1-4363-3565-2.

Elder Tom *Sakokweni*nkwas Porter, a member of the Bear Clan of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne, on the border of the provinces of Ontario and Quebec and the State of New York, has established his purpose with the Creator; he serves as an inspiration amidst a tragic legacy of European colonization in North America. His teachings, shared between 1989 and 2007 and later transcribed and edited by Lesley Forrester in the collection *And Grandma Said*, not only reveal the cognitive, emotional, spiritual, environmental, and physical legacies of European and later Canadian and American Federal government policies concerning First Nations in the twentieth century, but they also provide valuable lessons for all to live well and collaborate to enhance our shared capabilities as human beings. Passages from the book highlight, firstly, the legacy of cognitive assimilation or imperialism, defined by Mi'kmaq educational scholar Marie Battiste as "the imposition of one worldview on a people who have an alternative worldview, with the implication that the imposed worldview is superior to the alternative worldview."¹ Secondly, the passages identify how, in the twenty-first century, First Nations and all peoples may work to reclaim our diminished learning spirits, re-activate our collective consciousness, and strive for responsible and respectful relationships.

The thirty-four chapters of the book are a compilation of lectures and addresses given by Porter over twenty years. The first chapter begins with a dream and then proceeds to an opening address; the final chapter closes with a prayer, which would end any meeting on Mohawk territory. In the book's foreword, Forrester comments on the challenge of developing an outline for the book that embodied the lessons encoded in Porter's speaking engagements, and which carried the reader through a coherent body of knowledge. Life circumstances enabled her to take on the task of transcribing and editing Tom's lectures; she was collecting a disability pension but had adequate financial resources which enabled her to travel with Porter to his speaking engagements.

¹ Marie Battiste, "Maintaining Aboriginal Identity, Language, and Culture in Modern Society," *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000) 192-193.

When Forrester met Porter, she already had several friends and acquaintances in Tyendinaga and had heard Tom speak on many occasions. She had a great respect for the teachings of all of the Longhouse Mohawk Elders. When Porter agreed to let her transcribe and edit his lectures, Forrester attempted to locate as many records of Porter's lectures and speeches as possible. Overall, Forrester situates herself well in the knowledge that she has learned through her work with Porter, aptly identifying the limitations of her ability to transcribe, edit, and share the information that she has acquired.

In terms of the content of Porter's messages, he stresses that one of the harmful effects of colonization is the need of the colonized for psychological validation by the colonizers. Porter identifies how schools and workplaces in his lifetime – 1944-present – reinforced Euro-Canadian dominance. He recounts that his teachers in the 1950s and '60s dedicated almost no time to First Nations history as part of the larger history of the United States. The authors of his school textbooks depicted, in words and images, European explorers as "God's helpers and messengers" (p. 29). For Porter, the lessons and textbook images enabled the representations of whiteness and Euro-centrism to creep into his subconscious and, even though he is now in his mid-60s, he states that whites are still "in my head ... subconsciously kicking my butt every day. *I'm kicking my own butt*. So no physical American or Canadian man has to do it to me anymore ... [he is] inside here where I can't get him out" (p. 30). For Porter, lessons in English literacy, citizenship, and numeracy did not liberate his mind or enable him to lead economic and social development amongst the Mohawk.² Instead, these lessons set in motion a process of doubt over the validity and effectiveness of the knowledge and teachings of his grandmother and the Longhouse people. Porter explains that he still looks to non-Aboriginals to legitimize his teachings, which were given to him by his grandmother and the other Old People in his community:

I didn't know I was doing this, but whenever I accomplish something, I'm always looking to see where the first white woman or man is. Any one will do. And I show them what I did. And if that white man looks at it and he says, 'Tom, that's pretty. That's good,' I think *God* said it's okay. Because I've been taught that us Indians 'don't count for *nothing*. The white man is the only one that's God's cousin, his close relative, not us. We don't know nothing about it.' ... *I know that's not right*. But in here, inside, I've been trained to do that (p. 36).

² See Marie Battiste, "Mi'kmaq Literacy and Cognitive Assimilation," *Indian Education in Canada: Volume 1: The Legacy*, eds. Jean Barman et al., Nakota Institute Occasional Papers (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986) 23-44.

In this connection, Porter conveys in his lectures the fears the Old People in his village had concerning the authority of schools over the minds of children and youth. He cites warnings from his grandmother that he would lose his language and the way he thought as a Mohawk.

For Porter, the cognitive affects of colonization are perhaps worse than any war or disease because the psychological scars reach into the core of every Mohawk and every First Nation's consciousness, both individual and collective. Cognitive imperialism has affected governance, economic development, and family relationships on every reserve; Porter provides instructive examples. Both the terms of reference for election of chiefs and councillors and gender roles have been altered, while huge casinos are seen as the only viable pathways to economic development. Individualism is often stressed in the modern educational system. As a result, the values of the colonizers have usurped the linguistic and intellectual riches of ancestral peoples. The imposition of modern schools played a major role in reshaping Aboriginal societies. "Our own Indians ... they go a little bit to the white people's school and they come back, and they make pretend they don't know how to talk Indian any more, as if our language isn't good enough or something ... [they] start to feel ashamed and kinda hide their language, or hide their Indianness" (p. 371). The outcomes have been family violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and the establishment of casinos that further erode land bases and cultural heritage as band governments forsake sovereignty for profits.

In addition to recounting the destructive impact of colonization, Porter explains his belief that addressing the legacy of colonization requires both individual and collective efforts. Porter emphasizes the necessity of spirituality for human growth as part of a larger process of restoring harmonious relationships in all communities, amongst Iroquois and newcomers. Indigenous educational scholars and literacy practitioners like Battiste, Saulteaux Elder Danny Musqua, and Anishinaabe literacy practitioner, Ningwakwe George, stress that we make a pact with the Creator before coming on our Earthwalk; the agreement elucidates the goals for us to meet on our lifelong learning journeys.³ In Porter's eyes, even an unborn child is "learning how to be a human being" (p. 244).

³ Thoughts shared at the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre's 2007 Banff Dialogue and disseminated in Jonathan Anuik, "Animating the Spirit in Aboriginal Lifelong Learning: Report of the May, 2007 Banff Dialogue For Animation Theme Bundle 2: Comprehending and Nourishing the Learning Spirit," unpublished report for the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, in Partnership with the Canadian Council on Learning, December 2nd, 2008; also discussed in Ningwakwe George, "Aboriginal Adult Literacy: Nourishing their Learning Spirits," a literature review prepared for the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, in partnership with the Canadian Council on Learning, forthcoming.

According to Porter, all life forms have purposes while on Earth. As he puts it, “even if it’s hard nowadays, ‘cause of pollution, those fish never give up. They just keep on trying to fulfill what the Creator told them to do” (p. 12), provide nourishment for humans and other animals. For Porter, the power of the Creator is always with us as humans: “each one of you, I guess you could say it, was visited individually, young, old, this morning by the power of our Creator” (p. 373) in the guise of the sunlight. Ningwakwe, drawing on the findings of western psychologists, scientists, and traditional Elders and Old People, refers to the power of emotions and energies that drive our work. In one lecture, Porter asked participants to do the following: “touch your body, your body is warm. So, within every person, there is a fire. So, everything that has life, has a fire ... it’s the spirit that makes us live. It’s the fire, the flame within all of us that lives” (p. 182); the fire drives our spirit to seek out the learning environments that nourish it on its lifelong learning journey. Therefore, “every individual has his own song, so that he will have a purpose, and he will have a way to say thank you for his existence in the world” (p. 183).

Following the thirty-four chapters are four appendices, some of which are more useful than others. At Porter’s request, Forrester conducted two interviews with Porter’s children (Appendix A) who stressed the value of his wisdom in their formative years. The purpose of Appendix B – Directions for *Atenaha*, the Seed Game – is not as clear as I do not recall any reference to a game surfacing in the text and if it did, then there was not a pressing need to include this brief appendix. Appendices C and D are not titled although the two glossaries, one of Mohawk words and one of Mohawk passages, are useful tools for the reader and anyone who is interested in gaining a deeper appreciation of Mohawk lexicon and phrases. However, Forrester provides translations in footnotes when Porter speaks in Mohawk. Therefore, some explanation of the purpose of Appendices C and D as well as B would have been helpful for readers. Forrester does not discuss her professional background; some comments on how previous work experience or lack thereof affected her ability to transcribe and edit Porter’s teachings would have been helpful, especially for readers interested in oral history and community-based research. Readers do not know if she, herself, is Mohawk, or of Aboriginal background, and she does not comment on how her own racial, gender, and spiritual background had an effect on her work for the project.

Ultimately, Porter’s messages may be grouped under the two large themes of cognitive imperialism and spirituality and resonate throughout the many lectures that he has delivered over twenty years. Not only does Porter share what he has learned from his grandmother and through interaction with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians and Americans, but he informs First

Nations, Métis, Inuit, and non-Aboriginals of the importance of revisiting our collective consciousness. For the Mohawk, the collective consciousness promises to revive language, medicine, and governance structures that have the potential to heal the Mohawk and their fellow Six Nations brethren from the ravages of colonization, assimilation, Christianization, and cognitive imperialism. The utility of Porter's lessons, transcribed, and edited by Forrester, a dedicated volunteer, is in the wide range of topics covered. Students in senior elementary and high school, scholars in history, anthropology, English, languages and linguistics, women's and gender studies, psychology, education, social work, and business will be interested in Porter's perspective. Scholars with an interest in the application of oral history to contemporary and historical questions will appreciate Forrester's discussion in the Foreword of the challenges associated with publishing the wisdom of a respected Elder in the conventional western book structure and in English. Finally, the book, *And Grandma Said*, promises to appeal to scholars, practitioners, students, and those with an interest in Native-newcomer relations in North America because of its use of storytelling to share ancestral wisdom with contemporary society.