

The transcript of a talk by Andrea Bear Nicholas given at Presence of the Past: The Third National Conference on teaching, learning and communicating the history of Canada. 10/2003

I am reminded of the words of Franz Fanon, which I use frequently. He says "By a perverted sense of logic, colonialism turns to the past of an oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it." Now he was speaking about history, but that could be said as much about any languages in the world, indigenous and otherwise. So while it applies as much to history, I've also just read a book by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas called "Linguistic Genocide in Education" and I would say that practically everything that she says about language, language survival, and linguistic genocide could be said about history. Her definition of linguicide or linguicide, her coined term, is that it is ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups defined on the basis of language, culture, and history. And I would say that this statement could be said just as much about history, and I would like to coin the word historicide, the same definition, although you would add on the basis of language, culture and history.

I would also say also that history depends more on languages surviving than vice-versa. I would also like to mention some of her characteristics of linguicide to show how applicable they are to history and vice-versa, because I wanted to bring out what history is usually accused of, or historians. Linguicide is characterized by the glorification of mono-linguism, the one language, the stigmatization of the other languages, and the rationalization for it all. In other words the arguments go mono-linguism is normal, it's desirable, it's efficient, and it's inevitable. I would say that's pretty much the idea that has been used in the past about history: that the standard history, not the other voices, is normal. It's desirable, it's efficient and it's inevitable. So I would say that we also talk about history at least from our perspective as First Nations people, that it distorts, it omits, it lies about our history.

Those are the words that have been used to criticize historians and the similar kind of characterization about language genocide is invisibilization. I just want to give you a few examples, one example I just came across recently. I've been working with about five thousand pages of stories in Maliseet language on 80 tapes, large reel-to-reel tapes. No, actually 40 tapes but two sides, so more like 80 tapes. There are stories in this collection that, were it not for this collection, we would not know a lot of things. One example is a story of an attack on one of our villages Kingsclear, which is right near Fredericton. An attack on one of those villages in the middle of the night by virtually an army of woodsmen, primarily, from the perspective of the woman who told this story, an attack on the women. I couldn't find anything anywhere, other than this story from this woman in the Maliseet language, to verify in any other way that it happened until recently. But before I did, I found a club in one of the museums in town and it had a little funny note attached to the card that goes with it and it said "The people of Kingsclear say this was used to fight of an army of woodsmen if you can believe it." Now I found, with the help of some archivists, the record that this actually did happen at three o'clock in the morning on June 17th in 1861. And we just found it this week, we've been hunting for it, and it probably never would have been found had we not known to look for it. A piece of history that is pretty important in a people's history. But a piece of history, that were it not for the language and the storyteller in her language, we would not know this. Now it's just a matter of luck that someone bothered to tape her 30 years ago. So I guess I'm just saying that that is just the tip of the iceberg that I am talking about. Just imagine how many other stories will never be gathered because the speakers are dying with their languages. The other thing I wanted to say too is that her story is so completely different from the archived story. The emotion, the personal involvement, even though she didn't live in that time is just so completely different, almost like a completely different story.

Another one is treaties. For those of you who live in the Maritimes you probably know what a big issue treaties has become in the Maritimes. I'd like to use this example because it shows that most Maritimers did not even hear of treaties until the last decade or decade and a half ago. Why? Because someone, or some group of someones, chose not to include it in what children learn, what people learn in school. And I'm pretty convinced that it's been fairly deliberate. There has been an attempt to get rid of Aboriginal peoples since day one. To get rid of the truth about our past with the settlers, the immigrant society, the details of that past. To forget that our relationship is not a relationship of simply an ethnic group but that we actually are nations - we have a nationhood relationship with the Canadian state, the Canadian nation. I would insist that this be the understanding of the reason why this has been left out of the text books. But It basically came back

to bite us, really, in the last five, ten, twenty years. You know what? You know who it bit the most? It was Aboriginal people themselves. We're the ones who have been blamed for suddenly having these rights. For suddenly being able to fish and for suddenly being the problem -there is an Aboriginal "problem" in the Maritimes. Well, I would again say that if treaties had been part of peoples education, everybody would have grown up with that information. Even a judge brought it into one of his court decisions and he was told he couldn't do it because it wasn't common knowledge! So we lose both ways. The other point I need to make about treaties is that these treaties are not just Aboriginal treaties. These are treaties between Aboriginal people and the Canadian state, the Canadian people.

Another example I just recently came across - I'm suspicious about this one as I have yet to prove it - I've been working with the birth and death records from the 1800's. I have found that in a period of almost 20 years for the Maliseet community in the Fredericton area, there isn't one record - well, there is one -one record of death in almost 20 years in the church records. I find that strange. Especially when you consider that it's the late 1830's to the early 1850's, all kinds of births, all kinds of marriages. And guess what we're also seeing in the records at that time? Huge levels, high levels of disease; smallpox; scarlet fever, and typhoid fever. All of these diseases are being reported in the record elsewhere, but nobody's dying? I find that strange. I find that probably an example of messing with the records at the point of origin. If any of you have seen Michael Parenti's film " The Struggle for History," you will know that that is actually one of the struggles, or one of the realities of history, particularly of people who have been oppressed, people who have been conquered, people whose land and resources have been stolen from them. And in fact that period for Aboriginal people in New Brunswick could easily be called a holocaust from all other descriptions, yet we can find no conformation in the death records. So I still have to find out about that. It puts the burden on us to hunt for the answers, the explanations, the fullness of these stories.

I want to make one more point. Beyond the definition that I've given, or that Tove Skutnabb-Kangas gives us of linguicide or linguisticism, there are material reasons in the case of most indigenous peoples for this linguisticism, for this historicism or historicide. And that is that the theft of our lands and resources was the reason, was the purpose for not wanting us to stay connected to the land, not wanting us to stay as a responsibility of the government. It was part of the colonizing, the totalitary of the colonizing experience.

I just wanted to move on quickly with what does education now look like in countries practicing linguisticism or historicide. Well from my explanations and descriptions a moment ago I don't think we need to look very far. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas singles out Canada as one of the few countries in the world where linguisticism is a definite policy even if it's not written, where assimilation is a definite policy even if it would be denied. She looks at various aspects of this and I've taken her descriptions because they do apply across the board to language and history, and she divides them into structural and ideological. For example, our schools are primarily monolingual. We could say they've been primarily mono-history. The situation where the minority speakers are in school with no bilingual or multilingual teachers in the languages of minority children, or no multi or bi-cultural teachers for, I don't say entirely none, but certainly that's mostly the case for Aboriginal, for Maliseet children in New Brunswick. Just like the situation with Canada in general, most teachers don't know about treaties for example, although we are rapidly getting educated on that one.

Another example of the structural situation in our schools is that there is lack of mother tongue medium of education. This would be a pure example of genocide because whether or not the school is within our communities being taught in English, or whether it's in another community being taught in English with no choice for the children. It's like one of the definitions of genocide which is forcibly transferring the children from one culture to another. So if you create the conditions of forcibly transferring them to another culture, then it doesn't matter if you are actually moving them out of one culture into the other or if you are bringing those conditions into our communities.

Another situation, another structural aspect to these schools is that it is subtractive learning. In other words the children are submerged in another culture, another way of thinking, another vision of history, without any respect for the vision of history that those children bring, either through their languages or through their knowledge of their elders. In fact, by being schooled in English they're being cut off from the possible learning of history through their language with their elders. So this is a subtractive, rather than additive learning. In other words English is being put in the place and there is no attempt to maintain the mother tongue, there is no attempt to maintain the mother perspectives on culture, society and so on. It is subtractive learning and there is no choice in this, in most cases. Maliseet and Mik'maq people in New Brunswick are not asked "would you like to go to

school in your language?" ever.

Another structural example is teacher education for teachers from linguistic minorities or indigenous groups. And this teacher education usually assumes that only one language will be used: if it's in francophone Canada it's assumed it will be in French, if it's in anglophone Canada it's assumed that it will be English. And again those teachers might now be given opportunities to have a course in their language but they are not being taught or given assistance in teaching in their language. I want to just point out here too that there was a meeting of the Saskatchewan Native teachers about 10 or 15 years ago, in which the keynote speaker at the meeting pointed out that it was until the 1960's that the indigenous languages in Saskatchewan started to disappear. Now what is the key about the 1960's, 1970's is that it coincides with the moment at which Aboriginal teachers were being educated on mass in the teacher training programs. They were going back to their communities teaching only in English even though most of them spoke their own language. And I would dare to say that's probably a worse violence because the students see a non-Aboriginal teacher speaking English, well that's her language, that's okay. But if they see one of their own up there speaking only, teaching only in English, there is a huge message and the kids are not stupid.

Another aspect of the schools in Canada that create this situation is invisibilization. Integration, for assimilation is usually disguised as avoidance of segregation. Another point is that it's usually composed of failure to educate regarding a number of aspects. It's a failure to educate on linguistic and cultural rights - the United Nations guarantees that children of the world have a right to an education in the culture and language of their community, their mother tongue. Nobody teaches about that. The schools don't teach the political and economic context of education. Why is it that Aboriginal people needed to be educated in Canada? It wasn't just to be kind to them, it was to make them assimilate, to become part of the larger society and basically disappear. These schools don't teach the benefits of bi or multilingualism. In fact, most of our people have been taught that there is no benefit to multilingualism, the complete opposite from in Europe, and they're not being taught the benefit of multi-historical perspectives either, or multi-historical knowledge. It's primarily Canadian history, homogenized history that is all that anybody feels an obligation to teach except when there are specific programs but, those are usually just for Aboriginal children wherever there are enough of them in a particular school system.

Schools do not teach about the processes of imperialism and colonialism. I'm amazed that people come to university and don't know the first thing about it - they think it's that puritans wearing black shoes with buckles and that's colonialism, or little white houses and so on. They're not taught about the process of linguicide which is most vital in their own lives. They're not taught about the process of genocide and the fact that, for instance, there are five aspects of genocide, not just killing of a people but inflicting the conditions of life calculated to bring about their destruction; causing serious bodily harm; imposing measures to prevent births, forcibly transferring children from one culture to another - they're not taught these things. One of the reasons is that at least three of the those five international descriptions of genocide are not even in the Canadian criminal code. They were deliberately left out. They included forcibly transferring children, the imposing measures to prevent births, and causing serious bodily harm. Why? Because when Canada adopted it's own criminal code as a result of following the adoption of the UN Genocide Convention, Canada was still actively involved in forcibly transferring children from one culture to another because the residential schools didn't close until the 1980's. So I would dare say that this probably a very good reason that schools don't teach about it, but I think that we need to begin to teach about it.

Schools don't teach about the nationhood status of Aboriginal peoples or First Nations. In other words, our children in public schools are taught Canadian history like everybody else as if we're supposed to be Canadian citizens. Well again, citizenship was enforced on us for very ulterior motives. So that we couldn't have recourse to the United Nations and say hey, this country is practicing genocide or anything against us, because if we go to the United Nations they say well if your citizenship is Canadian then you go back to you country and deal with it there, if we are not nations . And we can't be nations and be citizens of Canada.

Schools don't teach about the political and economic distinctiveness of our cultures, of our ways of life. Instead they teach capitalism and entrepreneurialism. They teach about the elective system as if it was natural and normal and that was the only way to be in this world, when Aboriginal people had their entirely different forms of life and forms of political culture. I would say that entrepreneurial and capitalism in general are very alien and very destructive of our forms of life, and we need to understand how that works. We need to know that it's a very different system, or set of systems, that First Nations practice in those areas. We need to understand that.

Education for assimilation of minority indigenous children has a number of other characteristics. I'll just run through them quickly but they usually lack trained bilingual and bi-historical teachers, trained bilingual and bi-historical curricula. In other words, when there is a curriculum for Aboriginal history it's usually just for the Aboriginal kids, it's not for everybody. It lacks cognitively demanding material in two languages. It lacks equal exposure to speakers in both languages, and it generally produces high levels of anxiety, low motivation, and poor linguistic development in one or both languages. Deficit theories as a result of all this, which ascribe the reason that the kids don't do well in school to personal, cultural, linguistic, and historic reasons. For instance the deficit theory, if any of you read Innis' "History of Canada" which was used until quite recently in some universities, has about four pages on Aboriginal people and it starts practically every paragraph by saying what Aboriginal societies did not have or lacked. That they were basically deficient in agriculture, in political organization, and you just go right down the list, every paragraph. It's a perfect book to demonstrate my point about the deficit theory -that there is something wrong with the cultures, and this gets transferred as something wrong with the children and the people and the communities. It's used to explain poor performance in general.

Ok, what are the consequences? Basically, assimilation. If assimilation is our goal, what happens for Aboriginal communities and people is that it's assimilation only for the elites, and marginality for the majority. It is non-identification with the mother tongue and national history -dominance in one language, dominance in one history. And I say non-identification because children are shamed into this stigmatization that I mentioned earlier, into not identifying with their languages and their histories. The subtractive language learning means and equals genocide, as I've already mentioned as forcibly transferring the child. The western concept of identity itself - which is why I chose to speak today from the position of voice as opposed to identity - includes so many external and internal characteristics is in itself genocidal, if one can decide what is going to be the description of an Aboriginal person externally and the description of them internally then they can very quickly be destroyed.

One of the other consequences is that we've had an invention of history and culture as a result of the great void out there for Aboriginal students, and even possibly teachers looking for something to teach. What has come to fill it's place is invented, history invented culture. And I point to one book in particular, " The First Nations of the Maritimes" which was published with a great deal of money over the last 20 years or so, because I was involved at the beginning. That includes a lot of invented tradition, not something that is inherent or part of our history. And I will say two things; the medicine wheel and the idea of the concordat, both of them have been invented within the last 20 years. Neither are our tradition. I know that will offend many people because one of the realities of teaching anything within the context of some sort of spirituality or sacredness is that we get to identify with it on a gut level. So our own people get misled and get lied to. This is a serious problem that we're going to move more into unless we can start addressing it, recognizing it, realizing the only reason it happens is because there is that huge void.

Finally, another consequence is the disproportionate share of the burden for correcting any of these situations and realities falls on the indigenous people in these cases. And I would say that resistant struggles against them need to proceed on many fronts. We need to proceed with more schools in the mother tongue, immersion which also includes our histories. We need to have more research and curriculum development in our histories done by our people, not by our people paid by the state, but our people working on our own. We have a situation where our people are being paid by the state, meaning the government, and they essentially are told what to say, or they are chosen because they probably don't know an awful lot. Probably they know about the medicine wheel and a few other things and that becomes an Aboriginal history. I know this is disturbing, but this is in fact what is happening.

We need a more honest and probing history, some of those things that have been left out need to be put back into our histories. Not just for Aboriginal people but for all. We need more curriculum in the language, we need teacher training in the language, we need work finally to reverse the damage and effects of colonialism. Those of you who may have been shaking your heads a few minutes ago might be some of the people who really feel hurt by what they've been taught or what they've read. Just imagine what people at another level who aren't scholars and aren't educators may be absorbing without even thinking twice about it. We need to recognize the influence that this kind of teaching has had on colonized people and the effect of colonizing our minds.

The obstacles, we have lots of obstacles, ideological conditions, lack of prestige or value in First Nations language and history means that we don't have resources. We need to deal with the

cumulative effects of linguicide, historicide, genocide, and colonialism. In other words, our people have been taught to believe that our language isn't important for the most part. But the interesting thing is that the children that are coming up now are starting to really scream for it. We have to address all sides of these opinions. Genocide, colonialism, neo-colonialism, co-optation, the fact that the government hires our people to work for it's purposes rather than ours. Methodological individualism, the idea of the deficit, seeing the problems as inherent in individuals and not systemic or environmental. If history can bring that to what children learn, and they go away from school thinking there is something wrong with me or something wrong with my culture, then we have failed to give them the big picture. Opposition to unequal power analysis and those who ask why. In other words, by my standing here saying the kinds of things I do, I generally don't get invited to conferences. People like myself learn that you don't do this if you want to get invited, if you want to get hired, and if you want to be out there and to be seen to be doing something. Another obstacle is the professionalization of linguists and historians. Research for research sake is starting to be one of the problems. To collect our languages, to collect our history, to archive these things - rather than to be concerned about the survival of these languages and the survival of the interpretation, the perspective, the voice on these particular historical events - to do this work for profit, or to do this work for the state. I'm reminded here of the great number of historians who now sell their souls as experts witnesses against Aboriginal people in the courts. This is a very big trade when you think that some of them get as much as fifteen hundred dollars a day to do that research. Some are leaving teaching in universities to do it full-time.

In closing, I would like to say if we as passionate historians can divorce ourselves from a passionate interest in language survival and multiple voices that can be brought to history, it would be equivalent to the train conductor earnestly doing his job delivering Jews to the concentration camp. We may be doing our jobs well, but in narrow focus on getting the job done - the story written, the career advanced - we would be contributing to the death of the very people whose voices need to be heard, by doing nothing about linguicide. Thank you.