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Aboriginal Voices and the Politics of Representation in Canadian Introductory Sociology Textbooks

Seventy-seven Canadian introductory sociology textbooks are analysed for the way in which they represent Aboriginal peoples. This analysis is informed by critical theorists Michel Foucault, Dorothy Smith, Jean Baudrillard and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and by a good number of Aboriginal writers. I argue that as the discipline of sociology developed in Canada, the writers/editors of these textbooks denied Aboriginal voice in knowledge production, thereby portraying Aboriginal peoples in limited, often distorted ways.

Three main issues are discussed. First, is the sociology myth of culturally determined Inuit elder suicide, which states that in harsh times, the Inuit abandoned their elders, and encouraged or assisted in their suicide.

From sociology's beginnings as a discipline, this myth was used to exemplify cultural relativism and altruistic suicide. I undertook a Foucauldian "archaeology of knowledge" beginning with the textbooks, and tracking back through secondary sources, eventually to the misreading of primary sources. This myth became in Baudrillard's terminology a "simulacrum" that was "hyper-real," burying knowledge of actual beliefs and practices of the Inuit concerning their elders, and masking contemporaneous harmful government practices.

Second is the portrayal of the Northwest Coast potlatch as exhibiting an extreme, often destructive competition. This story was traced back through Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934), to Franz Boas' flawed 1897 representation of the ceremony. Aboriginal sources discussing the potlatch are ignored, the broader meaning of the ceremony to the people is consistently buried, and the government's ban of the potlatch from 1884 to 1951 is left unspoken.

The third issue concerns the Oka confrontation of 1990. Again the Aboriginal people were not permitted voice, despite the existence of many Aboriginal written works on the subject. Instead, a 'warrior frame' was developed and reproduced, portraying Mohawk warriors as criminal outsiders and warlike militants, excluding the important role of women throughout the confrontation, depicting a false picture of Aboriginal unity on the methods employed, and presenting the Quebec police in an inaccurate functionalist light.