

THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN DEWEY THROUGH  
AN INDIGENOUS LENS:  
BACK PORCH SOCRATES CAFE

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### **Abstract**

As I work to recover subjugated knowledge, etching out spaces for the silenced voices of Indigenous people, I understand to an increasing extent, that the Indigenous historical perspective is not represented accurately or is entirely absent in our books of history, on college campuses, and in the political sphere. In conceptualizing the educational philosophy of John Dewey, I was overcome with much to consider in my world. What would not escape me was that at the time of the publication of *Democracy and Education* in 1916, the Native American boarding school process was firmly under way, where the annihilation of a people was a government policy. As Native American children were held captive by white colonizer Americans, in Dewey's contrasting world, there were many exciting experiences unfolding in education and philosophy. In Chicago, the Jane Addams Hull House was the center of progressive education. The writing of *Democracy and Education*, and later, *Experience and Education*, is the result of Dewey's observations at Hull House. Here, I examine Dewey's analyses through an Indigenous lens. The terms *Native American* and *Indian* are used interchangeably.

*Keywords:* Dewey, Indigenous Lens, Back Porch Socrates Café, Native American, Democracy and Education, Jane Adams Hull House

*“Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future.”*

---- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

In contemplating the writing of John Dewey, I begin with first considering an outside text, *Cultural Miseducation*.<sup>1</sup> In the introduction, Jane Roland Martin makes reference to Plato and Rousseau. I would like to elaborate my thoughts on Plato. Through many Sunday evening conversations on the porch, I have had the most cherished opportunity to see Plato through my son’s precious eyes. With a cold beverage in the evening, my son, Michael and I have made many memories while sharing various thoughts and ideas. At the time, Michael was a student of Classics. And we had contemplated the world through philosophy many a summer evening as we watched students jogging, walking, or playing Frisbee. We would sit and talk until far in the distance, the sun faded on the horizon painting the sky in purpureal and pink pastel colors. Often times, sitting together, we would continue for some time, visiting in the darkness. Some of what I have harvested in these conversations has been weaved within this paper. Indeed, we have our very own Back Porch Socrates Café.

Martin writes that Plato’s two examples of liabilities were cowardice and impiety.<sup>2</sup> And that two of *her* examples of liabilities were violence and hatred.<sup>3</sup> Martin’s concerns with violence were described as being at home, school, the neighborhood, or in the world.<sup>4</sup> Concerns of hatred fell into the categories including race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion.<sup>5</sup> It is further explained that this concern does not lie with which liabilities are worse, but with

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, Jane Roland. *Cultural miseducation: In search of a democratic solution*. Vol. 8. Teachers College Press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Martin, Jane Roland. *Cultural miseducation: In search of a democratic solution*. Vol. 8. Teachers College Press, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

Plato's solution.<sup>6</sup> And on page one of the introduction, Martin cites Plato's solution of censorship to the problem of miseducation, as being unacceptable.<sup>7</sup>

My goal is not to challenge Jane Roland Martin on this statement of disagreement with Plato. But I would like to process my thoughts on the matter before continuing. Through the exchange of dialogue with Michael, I have gleaned the following. Since the soul is a rather difficult, abstract, concept, Plato chooses a city as an analogy for the soul. Plato is using this idea of how a city would be run, in relation to how one would run the psychological self. And the rational, discerning self should be the master, sitting at the throne of the idea of oneself and who one is. First, courage is needed to survive. Second, the rational part of oneself is needed to survive. And third, the appetitive part of oneself is needed to survive. These three things need to be in harmony, and this harmony can only exist when the rational part of the self is in control. This is quite simply, a description of Plato's tripartite theory of soul. So, when Plato speaks of censorship, he is making reference to the rational part of the self being in control of the rest of the human person. Instead of our appetites controlling us, or our emotions controlling us, our reasoning should control us. And the censorship that Jane Roland Martin only briefly mentions is not described at all. As Michael explained, Plato saw censorship as a way for the soul to stratify what is ingested into our moral psychology, to arrange or classify first what is good or what is bad before ingesting. And in carrying out this censorship process one is taking care of the soul. With this in mind I now turn my attention to John Dewey.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 1.

Dewey writes of a child growing up in a family of musicians.<sup>8</sup> The child is stimulated by music and has capacities for music that are inevitable.<sup>9</sup> The child takes interest in music that is molded by impulses which might not have ever been awakened given a different environment.<sup>10</sup> But perhaps more importantly, what Dewey is explaining, is the significance of having been able to share something with the group to which the child belonged.<sup>11</sup> Participation in the lives of those with whom one is connected is inevitable.<sup>12</sup> The social environment is an unconscious and educative, formative influence that exists apart from any set purpose.<sup>13</sup>

One would be hard-pressed to find any individual who could find fault with this precious vision of a child growing up with the privilege of being surrounded by music. It is simply impossible to disagree with Dewey in that this would logically lead to a love of music and an inclination to participate with family in such a creative manner. One might observe that Dewey is overwhelmingly optimistic in his views at large. *Visualize* this child sharing this connection, surrounded by family, embraced by music. Now, visualize a child whose family is painfully absent in her life, consumed with work, a schedule which leaves no time for the child. What about the child who has not even the ability to *hear* music? To provide some balance, consider yet another great mind into this Socrates Café of sorts: Paulo Freire. When Freire was speaking in regard to a sense of *totality*, he wrote, “Individuals who were *submerged* in reality, merely *feeling* their needs, *emerge* from reality and perceive the *causes* of their needs.”<sup>14</sup> And we now see that everything takes on an entirely different perspective depending on point of view. The

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and education*. Courier Corporation, 1916, 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000.

reality of the child surrounded by a family her entire life, molded and nurtured through music, is entirely different from the reality of the child who has no family or was born deaf.

While exploring the ideology of Dewey alongside Freire, there are some tensions detected between the two. Quite naturally, a democracy will be challenged by the oppressed. The oppressed will constantly hold those in power accountable to the basic tenets that represent a democracy. It as if Freire's ideology appears to challenge Dewey's focus on democracy. In the miseducation of Native American history, the great removal, and specifically Indian boarding schools, certainly Jane Roland Martin as well as Paulo Freire are both exceptional sources. Most definitely, boarding schools were hell bent on assimilation, which resulted in the execution of a hidden curriculum that was nothing less than cultural genocide, systematically crafted to establish a permanent obliteration of humanity in the name sake of *education*.

In regard to natural development and social efficiency as aims, Dewey writes, "A time of domination by authority will call out as response the desirability of great individual freedom; one of disorganized individual activities the need of social control as an education aim."<sup>15</sup> So, when a society finds itself in a situation of great personal freedom, there is a political minority that inevitably arises calling for control and order. Vice versa, in a situation where there is great personal control, a hunger will arise for personal freedom. In consideration of Dewey's thoughts regarding freedom, a faint light reflecting *some* balance comes into view. A revision and reflection follows with an integration of Freire.

Jane Roland Martin surely had sound reason for shooting a dagger into Plato's view of censorship on the first page of her introduction to *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Solution*. It appears that Plato was in agreement with censorship because of the

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<sup>15</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and education*. Courier Corporation, 1916, 123.

content of poetry, such as Zeus raping and pillaging. Martin is against censorship because of knowledge being withheld. In consideration of the optimistic world as seen through Dewey's eyes, he appears to lean toward the privileged in his writing. Freire informs through duality where one group holds the objective of achieving and maintaining domination and the other group to be dominated holds the objective of achieving and maintaining liberation.

In her book, *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Solution*, Jane Roland Martin happily describes some of her early educational experiences. When she and her classmates were 8-year-olds they constructed tee-pees and enacted some of the daily activities of American Indian life.<sup>16</sup> As 10-year-olds she recalls how proud she was of having played the part of a Hebrew slave burdened with the task of making bricks without straw.<sup>17</sup> Also, she and her friends wrote and produced a play based on the life of Harriet Tubman.<sup>18</sup> As 12-year-olds, Martin and her classmates were colonial Americans.<sup>19</sup> "From our immersion in other times and peoples, we children became vicariously acquainted with a wide range of cultural assets and liabilities."<sup>20</sup> One solution that Martin points to in regard to the educational problem of generations is the acknowledgement by all educational agents that they are both the guardians and transmitters of our culture's stock.<sup>21</sup> Although Martin acknowledges that Dewey had not gone where she has with the wealth of cultures and liabilities, the educational experiences she so fondly recalls remarkably align with Dewey's ideas. John Dewey definitely stood for experiential learning and making personal meanings in the way that Martin describes above.

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<sup>16</sup> Martin, Jane Roland. *Cultural miseducation: In search of a democratic solution*. Vol. 8. Teachers College Press, 2002, 87.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>19</sup> Martin, Jane Roland. *Cultural miseducation: In search of a democratic solution*. Vol. 8. Teachers College Press, 2002, 88.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Dewey writes of the two senses of learning. On one hand, learning consists of something external, the sum of what is handed down in books or passed on by learned men.<sup>22</sup> Learning is an accumulation of stored cognitions.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, learning is something that the student *does* when he studies.<sup>24</sup> This is an active, personal affair.<sup>25</sup> Dewey points out the dualism here between knowledge that is external, objective, and knowing as being internal, subjective and physical. This is the sort of learning whereby the teacher creates an environment that engages children, challenges them, and provides for them to make personal meanings. This is the sort of learning that brings immense joy. These environments created by teachers fostered growth and development, curiosity and questioning, experience and learning. Why veer down this path of experiential learning? One, to better understand and appreciate John Dewey. And two, to point out that these were not the environments created for Native American children in boarding schools at the time of Dewey's publication. Indian boarding schools were following an entirely different agenda of cultural genocide. This fact is a contradiction of all that is good and just. Conceptualizing the Deweyan references to morals, and the numerous references to Greek philosophy through an Indigenous lens, are like trying to see through a heavy fog.

The Greek viewpoint is the foundation of philosophy. Therefore, John Dewey and Jane Roland Martin both have an affinity for the Greek mindset and poetry. And after all, *Homer* was as a Bible to the Greeks, a book of morals, history, a national inspiration.<sup>26</sup> According to Dewey, "In any case, it may be said that an education which does not succeed in making poetry a resource in the business of life as well as in its leisure has something the matter with it—or else

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<sup>22</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and education*. Courier Corporation, 1916, 361.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>26</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and education*. Courier Corporation, 1916, 263.

the poetry is artificial poetry.”<sup>27</sup> Dewey writes that historically, poetry has been allies with religion and morals and serves the purpose of penetrating the enigmatic depths of matters.<sup>28</sup>

Dewey’s fondness of religion and morals is seemingly effervescent. Yet, at the time of *Democracy and Education*’s publication, Indian children were being torn from their families and placed in boarding schools, which were disease infested, prison-like atmospheres that resulted in a horrific number of deaths.<sup>29</sup> To compound matters, in the teaching of history, the genocidal aspects of curriculum for Indian boarding schools is nowhere to be found. Indigenous histories are misrepresented in our public schools, if not entirely absent from the curriculum. The latter is not a part of any happen stance hidden curriculum, but a direct and willful act of miseducation. As previously noted, the destruction of Native American people through the boarding schools was in full swing at the time of publication of *Democracy and Education*. To what extent did such an inhumane event warrant consideration by Dewey?

It is quite clear that Dewey is not writing with the curriculum for Native American boarding schools in his realm of thoughts whatsoever. However, in chapter XVII, Dewey differentiates living from living worthily. To live worthily, man must first live with collective society and also, time, energy spent upon the gaining of subsistence detracts from activities that have an inherent rational meaning.<sup>30</sup> True life is only achievable with as little degree as possible placed toward physical necessities, which are to be attained without effort or attention.<sup>31</sup> “Hence

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>29</sup> Dejong, D.H. (2007). “Unless They Are Kept Alive”: Federal Indian Schools and Student Health, 1878-1918. *American Indian Quarterly*, 31(2), 156-282. Retrieved f from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4138947>  
(Links to an external site.)

<sup>30</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and education*. Courier Corporation, 1916, 263.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 263.

slaves, artisans, and women are employed in furnishing the means of subsistence in order that others, those adequately equipped with intelligence, may live the life of leisurely concern with things intrinsically worthwhile.”<sup>32</sup> As we read we realize that this is Dewey’s critique and it becomes clear that Dewey does not align with these oppressive views.

Nevertheless, John Dewey also published *Experience and Education* in 1938. Dewey wrote, “In what I have said I have taken for granted the soundness of the principle that education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience---which is always the actual life-experience of some individual.”<sup>33</sup> But experiences for who? Even though the writing of *Experience and Education* falls at a later date, there is still not one shred of evidence that even for a brief moment, Dewey considered the educational experiences of those marginalized and oppressed. Regardless of how valuable Dewey’s ideas may have been for education, his writing reflects what was desired for mainstream Anglo-America.

So, what of the never-ending references to Greek philosophy? When we think of Native American folk ways, we think of traditions. Indian people live by participating in these ways and inculcating the actions of carrying them out into their everyday lives. We must also remember that Native Americans hold a deeply spiritual connection to the land. Stories and memories are the knowledge of Native American people and are handed down generation after generation, steeped in tradition. Martin and Dewey are quick to mention the Greeks. Consider the very traditional and cultural lives of Native American people. How might Plato look at that? As Michael pointed out, he might see prowess in battle. He would observe that Indian people

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>33</sup> Dewey, John. *Experience and education*. Simon and Schuster, 2007.

definitely know about honor. He might admire the efficiency and spartanist way of living. But is he going to ultimately think that they have anything of value? Do Indian people have a philosophy? Do they have the ability to contemplate the form of just, considering their culture? Do they have the capacity as a culture to inculcate justice into their ways of living, while preserving their native ways prior to European contact?

I believe so.

If one looks through the lens of a Hellenic mind-set, Native Americans had folk customs. Native American cultures are built on oral traditions, Indian people *thrived* on these oral traditions. Native American people had great virtue and great piety. The Greek philosopher honors traditionalism, but also wants reason and logic. And, it is as if Freire was influenced by Greek philosophy. Freire would have called everyone together for dialogue. Freire would have strived for critical consciousness.

I wondered if Plato might have liked the idea of reforming the society to ensure that reason and logic is understood. But how would that be done? Since Martin and Dewey are schooled in Greek philosophy and so inclined to cite it, exactly how would Plato have thought about the approach taken by the White man toward Indian people? Michael stated that the Greek philosopher does not hold a deconstructionist view. Still, we sat in silence, thinking, attempting to resolve all of these references to Greek philosophy. As my son and I contemplated this line of thinking, Michael finally stated that Plato would despise the way the children were subjected to ethnic cleansing in Native American boarding schools. Keeping in mind the curriculum and teaching in Native American boarding schools I turn back to poetry. Martin describes parents and teachers as mediators.

Upon a child hearing a particularly frightening story, a parent or teacher may draw upon the moral of the story while reminding the child that the story is pretend.<sup>34</sup> She referred to Rousseau and a *three-way* relation, placing Emile's tutor center stage: "Child hears story *as it is mediated by an adult who has the child's growth and development at heart.*"<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Martin describes an irony in that although Socrates deeply desired his utopia to be educative rather than miseducative, he separated stories from their pedagogical contexts. "Attributing harmful powers to stories in and of themselves, he then called for their removal from society."<sup>36</sup> And once again, the theme of censorship lurks in the shadows. Was Martin and Socrates concerned about stories and poetry of fiction, nonfiction, or both? Does it even matter?

Regardless of whether Martin, Socrates, or Dewey are making reference to stories and poetry of fiction, it remains quite profound that much of American history is taught with so many atrocities minimized or entirely absent. Of course, there is an inherently obvious difference between poetry and stories of fiction as opposed to stories and poetry that represent factual content, knowledge of history. However, Martin and Dewey describe care and concern for a child's heart. Is it possible that these stories, deemed inappropriate, could be categorized in like manner as the history of slavery or the genocide of Native Americans? When Indigenous histories are accounted, they are routinely White-washed.

This slanted take on history is in itself censorship. One might state that censorship is a form of miseducation. Consider the opposite of censorship. Please consider censorship in the manner of not only withholding knowledge, but also perpetuating false knowledge or the willful submission of reading or media that is harmful, evil, or untrue, for the sake of manipulation.

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<sup>34</sup> Martin, Jane Roland. *Cultural miseducation: In search of a democratic solution*. Vol. 8. Teachers College Press, 2002, 77.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Martin consistently makes reference to mediators for students. In making these references to mediators for students in regard to protecting a child's heart, is this a contradiction for Martin? It is quite rational to see mediation as a form of censorship.

And, is there some fear that students will relate with what is not intended? Is it possible that the true account of these American atrocities is considered harmful for society? If this is the fact of the matter, then our Indigenous histories are too gruesome and shameful to be openly and fully disclosed with society, which speaks for itself. Or, is this simply business as usual where the ruling class plunders and pillages, not much unlike Zeus... all be it in the name of manifest destiny? And then by leaving out the voices of the oppressed in our history we experience the ultimate form of censorship: omission.

This omission is shameful; this is cultural miseducation. The voices of Indigenous people have been lost. Jane Roland Martin defined cultural miseducation as follows:

Cultural miseducation occurs when so many cultural liabilities or such devastating ones are passed down that a heavy burden is placed on the next generation; or alternatively, when invaluable portions of the culture's wealth are not passed down. And of course, it occurs when these sins of omission and commission are conjoined.<sup>37</sup>

Martin's definition speaks volumes. However, even further confusion is represented in the *false* transmission of cultural stock. Martin pointed out the following excerpt from one Native American scholar:

The view of Indians as hostile savages who capture white ladies and torture them, obstruct the westward movement of peaceable white settlers, and engage in blood-thirsty uprisings in which they glory in the massacre of innocent colonists, and pioneers is dear to the hearts of producers of bad films and even worse television. However, it is a view that is most deeply embedded in the American unconscious.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Martin, Jane Roland. *Cultural miseducation: In search of a democratic solution*. Vol. 8. Teachers College Press, 2002.

<sup>38</sup> Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred hoop: Recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions: With a new preface*. Beacon Press, 1986.

This representation of Native Americans is clearly problematic in its representation of glorifying such violence. The responsibility of educational agents who transmit cultural stock is quite profound, for in resolving the omission of the lost Indigenous voices of the past, it becomes necessary to break through the dominant Anglo viewpoint to ensure that these lost voices are accurately represented.

John Dewey referred to the renewal of life by transmission. As our world, our environment changes, a continual re-adaptation to the environment is necessary for the continuity of life.<sup>39</sup> Dewey further states that, “‘Life’ covers customs, institutions, beliefs, victories and defeats, recreations and occupations.”<sup>40</sup> According to Dewey, this renewal is not automatic and involves painstaking effort.<sup>41</sup> The lost voices of those colonized must be preserved. Michael once shared with me that our history, at worst, is a brutal story of conquest, colonization, and oppression. At best, it is the story of the rise of a small nation state on the eastern coast of America, rising to become one of the most prominent powers in history. More likely it is somewhere in between he had concluded.

These Socrates Café times are some of my most cherished memories with Michael. Throughout the composition of this paper, we had numerous of these where we exchanged philosophical ideas and my son guided me and taught me regarding Classical ideas. At one moment toward reaching the closing of this writing as we exchanged ideas, Michael stood up and stated the following as he slowly paced, consumed with the deepest of thinking, as his final thoughts came into view in real time. And he stated:

In our worst moments, we are brutal conquerors at different times in our history. At our best moments, we live out some of the greatest ideals which have ever been envisioned in our institutions and national character. Both have great utility because when we are brutal

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<sup>39</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and education*. Courier Corporation, 2004, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

conquerors, we can use that as a means of evaluating the actions we take, either in our personal lives, governmental or societal. Our history presents for us ideals which we consistently strive for. In turn, our history presents for us ideals which we must consistently strive to *never again repeat*. Both of these define us.

So we are both noble and profane, oppressors and oppressed, black and white, north and south. But we are also something higher. To be American is to be all of these. Hence, we have been forced to take on the name of our oppressors. We are, after all, Native *American*. Finally, in regard to passing down cultural stock, Dewey warns in earnest: “Unless pains are taken to see that genuine and thorough transmission takes place, the most civilized group will relapse into barbarism and then into savagery.”<sup>42</sup> May the powers that be, see the wisdom in Dewey’s warning.

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<sup>42</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and education*. Courier Corporation, 2004, 7.

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