

Encouragement Is a Two-Edged Sword

ALISON BLACKDUCK

BEFORE READING

In your journal, recall a time when you were given a compliment that seemed to denigrate you, your culture, your social class, or your age group at the same time as it was meant to encourage you. As a class, discuss your experiences.

Elements • analysis and assessment of ideas, stereotypes, tone, political correctness • oral presentation: panel discussion, role-play • analysis and assessment of media portrayals of Aboriginal Canadians • research for independent study

Please don't take exception to the fact that I'm a young aboriginal woman who's finishing her undergraduate degree.

Since I've started writing on this page, I've received e-mails from a few readers congratulating me on being in university.

"It's good to see that you're in university," is the general sentiment that's expressed, although one reader advised me that I must finish my studies in order to enhance my professional credibility as a journalist.

Now you're probably wondering why I'm bringing this up. It's good to have one's achievements and hard work recognized, right? Encouragement is desirable, isn't it? Well, of course, but what's undesirable are the implicit assumptions underlying the "encouragement" I've received.

If I weren't a young aboriginal woman who's finishing her undergraduate degree, but rather a young Euro-Canadian woman who was finishing her undergraduate degree, would any reader pick up on it and make a point of telling me what a fine example I'm setting? Would somebody tell me that I'd hurt my professional credibility as a journalist if I failed to complete my degree requirements? I doubt it, yet nobody seems to question the professional credibility of Avril Benoit and Naomi Klein, two young celebrated Canadian journalists who openly admit they're university dropouts. In fact, judging from biographical profiles of both women that I've read in

the popular press, both regard their failure as a sign of their journalistic gifts; they were simply too much in demand as journalists to finish their studies. So what gives?

My aboriginal background and some people's perception of what it means to be an aboriginal in Canada today is what gives. To some, I'm an exception to the rule, which then begs the question: The rule of what? If I'm exceptional because I'm an aboriginal person who's dedicated the past few years of my life to my studies, then those who write me to congratulate me don't expect such behaviour from an aboriginal person. The implicit assumption is that I'm doing really well for an aboriginal person because we're perceived widely as being incapable of attaining certain levels of success as defined by non-aboriginal society.

This reasoning usually follows through to one of two predictable conclusions: Those aboriginal people who are "successful" must either be exceptional to escape their pathetic circumstances or they were raised with middle-class values in assimilated middle-class families, therefore, they're privileged, inauthentic representatives of aboriginal society.

Both conclusions are false and damning.

According to Plains Cree Métis writer and academic Emma LaRocque, being "exceptional is but another rung on the ghettoization ladder."

Those who are deemed exceptional are perceived as belonging to neither aboriginal society nor non-aboriginal society. They don't belong to aboriginal society because many Canadians assume that there's nothing inherent in contemporary aboriginal society that fosters excellence and success, only despair. (You've no idea how many non-aboriginal people who, upon meeting me for the first time, decry the pain I must have experienced, what with the high suicide rate and all those homeless aboriginal people living on the street!)

And they don't belong to non-aboriginal society because they're, quite frankly, aboriginal. In either case, they're suspect and must be segregated into another category known as the Aboriginal Intellectual Elite, which by its very moniker smacks of self-service.

The other extreme assumption, which is the question of privilege, is countered brilliantly by Cree/Métis writer Kim Anderson in her book *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*. Anderson is the daughter of an upper-middle-class woman of predominantly English Protestant ancestry and a man of mixed Scottish, Cree, French and Saulteaux ancestry who is often taken to task by aboriginal and non-aboriginal people for her relatively privileged upbringing, which includes a university education, and her lighter skin. She admits she's never experienced overt or violent prejudice, poverty, abuse and family breakdown that is accepted as the lot of the aboriginal majority. But she then turns this around by asking why these basic human rights are taken for granted as commonplace for most non-aboriginal Canadians, yet deemed as privileges for aboriginal people?

Why, indeed. For my part, I don't see much about my life or my choices that's exceptional, nor do I feel I'm breaking free from a predetermined life script that's dictated and imposed by cultural stereotypes about aboriginal people. I write, I study and I work for the same reasons everybody else does — their own — and fortunately I have the opportunity to do so. My only hope is that everybody has such freedom, because freedom isn't an exception to the rule, it is the rule we should all uphold, for your sake and mine.

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after READING

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Respond to Blackduck's dilemma in a list with the headings "Agree" and "Disagree."
- Ⓛ 2. a) From this **essay**, describe the stereotypes that non-Natives have tended to ascribe to Native people. With a partner, discuss how these stereotypes came about and how they are reinforced today.
b) Are Blackduck's comments about non-Natives unbiased and free of stereotypes?
c) How has she supported her inferences and conclusions?
3. Explain the effectiveness of Blackduck's use of a single-sentence paragraph and rhetorical questions. With a partner, compare your explanations.
4. a) Using examples from the essay, describe the **tone** of this essay.
b) Agree or disagree with the following statement, and defend your opinion:
"Blackduck's argument would have had more impact if a more academic and formal tone had been used."