



American Indian identity and intellectualism: the quest for a new red pedagogy

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In this article Grande argues that American Indian intellectualism and its central concerns – sovereignty and self-determination – have been ignored, obscured, and impeded by dominant modes of educational theory. More specifically, she argues that current obsessions with identity theory and formation work to deny the critical difference of American Indians as tribal peoples of distinct nations with sovereign status and treaty rights. Dominant modes of identity theory, thus, work to obscure the real sources of oppression of Indigenous peoples, substituting radical social transformation with a politics of representation. In working to address the inner contradictions between dominant modes of identity theory and American Indian tribal subjectivity, Grande employs the use of narrative, examining the text of her own identity formation through the lenses of differing modes of identity theory, namely essentialist, postmodern, and critical identity theories. She analyzes the potential of each theory to produce transformative knowledge and inform the discourse on American Indian identity and intellectualism. The author ends with a discussion of the need for a critical Indigenous theory of tribal identity and liberation, for a collectivity of critique that ultimately forms the foundation for a new *Red Pedagogy*.

There is no image of an American Indian intellectual...it is as though the American Indian has no intellectual voice with which to enter into America's important dialogues. (Elizabeth Cook Lynn)

Every act of creation is first an act of destruction. (Pablo Picasso)

Introduction

As I reflect on my newly arrived at postgrad, postdoc, pretenure status, I shiver at the thought of entering the postmodern, poststructuralist arena of Whitestream¹ (Denis, 1997) academe. I find myself consumed by thoughts of how to construct space for Native intellectualism in an institution historically structured for its abolition. Embedded in my own and the collective consciousness of most American Indians is the memory of school as a site of cultural genocide and, as an American Indian scholar, I feel overwhelmed by the project of working to re-imagine school as a site of revolutionary struggle. Nevertheless, I rally onward compelled by my desires for the sovereignty and self-determination of all Indigenous peoples. While the above concerns inform and help shape the content of this essay, it more directly examines the ways in which Native intellectualism and the issues of sovereignty and self-determination have over time been obscured and impeded by the dominant discourses of educational theory.

For example, in this moment of late capitalism and cultural postmodernism the central questions regarding American Indian intellectualism and the academy continue to be defined in terms of identity: Who counts as American Indian and who should be

allowed to speak from the authority of that voice? Who can conduct research on behalf of American Indian communities? What counts as the real Indian history and who determines what counts? While the dominant theories of identity provide some means of navigating through the ensuing culture wars, they ultimately fail to consider the paradigmatic and constitutional difference of American Indian tribal identity and as such fail to address the underlying concerns of tribal sovereignty and self-determination. In other words, that the dominant modes of identity theory are universally employed to explain the conditions of all “marginalized peoples” erases the particular concerns of American Indians and, in this way, contributes to the continued assault on Indigenous social, political, and economic rights. The lumping together of Native peoples with other marginalized groups denies the central and critical difference of American Indians as tribal peoples of distinct nations with sovereign status and treaty rights and it is the ongoing historical denial of this difference that provides the conditions for the sustained project of cultural genocide. In short, centering American Indian discourse in questions of identity serves to obscure the real sources of oppression, substituting the possibility for radical social transformation with a politics of representation (Ebert, 1996a).

A subsidiary effect of defining rights issues in terms of identity is that the work of American Indian academics raising the difficult questions of Native rights is passed over for the more marketable and seemingly more relevant confessional narratives and autobiographies. As a result, Indian scholars often suffer untenable labor conditions as American Indian intellectualism is relegated to the outskirts of critical discourse.

My primary concern is, thus, to systematically reveal how the dominant modes of identity theory have contributed to the current state of American Indian intellectualism and to explore ways in which American Indian scholars can work to dismantle the choke-hold of Western theory, engaging instead in a project of Indigenous liberatory theory and the construction of a new *Red Pedagogy*.²

Methodology

In this essay I work to challenge the dominant modes of identity theory and transgress the fissure of theory as either intimate, confessional narrative or detached, global theory and to instead ride the faultline between the discursive and nondiscursive worlds. In working to address the inner contradictions between the dominant modes of identity theory and American Indian tribal subjectivity, I employ the use of narrative. More specifically, I construct a short narrative of my own identity and engage in a critical analysis of this text by examining it through the differing modes of identity theory, namely (left) essentialist, postmodern, and critical identity theories.

In this process, I analyze each theory’s limits and possibilities for producing transformative knowledge and informing the discourse of American Indian identity and intellectualism. The role of theory in this analysis is, first, to provide a frame of reference through which to comprehend narrative and, second, to provide a mode of inquiry through which theory itself can be critically engaged. The operating assumption is that experience is neither self-intelligible nor autonomous but, rather, highly mediated by and subject to historical and material forces (i.e., capitalism, patriarchy, White supremacy).

I end with a discussion of the need for a critical Indigenous theory and praxis – a new Red Pedagogy – that engages in dialectical contestation with the dominant

discourses of liberatory theory. It is my hope that the emergent critique will help construct a viable space for American Indian intellectualism and American Indian scholars working to meet the demands of their university and home communities. In addition, I hope it works to build solidarity among all Indigenous peoples, calling attention to the political urgency for communities to engage in the struggle against the burgeoning effects of global, racist, patriarchal capitalism. Finally, I hope that the fusion of narrative and high theory, in and of itself, provides a space in which the intersections of academic insurgency and revolutionary work can be critically engaged, and that this engagement leads to the development of a true counter-discourse, counter-praxis, counter-ensoulment³ of liberation.

Part I: The narrative

I am the perfect postmodern subject, a no-size-fits-all kind of girl. By bloodcount I am predominantly Quechua with residuals of Spanish and French blood. In terms of sociocultural location, I am *Indígena*, a Peruvian Indian woman born into a family that journeyed from the abject poverty of *los campesinos* to the edges of an American middle-class existence. Even though I was raised as one of Pachamama's⁴ children – learning the language and culture of the Quechua people – my identity portfolio is “tainted” by the fact that I am a “mixed-blood” currently living away from my people. This is further complicated by the fact that in Peru *los indios*, though culturally recognized in contra-distinction to the Spanish (White) elite and the light-skinned *mestizós* (*Cholos*), are, in matters of governance, considered to be extinct and, in matters of society, considered to be invisible. All told, I am differently perceived and named in all of my communities: in the eyes of the Peruvian government I am virtually nonexistent; to those of the Quechua, I am *illakquna*;⁵ and to Native North America I am yet another Indian without proper identity papers⁶ and, thus, a highly suspect interloper to the increasingly overcrowded space of American Indian-ness.

To complicate matters further, because I am from a Latin American country I am often, in the United States, assigned defacto membership of the Latino community. While I understand the rationale behind such strategic “border crossing” and the need to build political solidarity, lost to the postmodernist signification of the transcendental “Latino” is the complicated, historical-materialist reading of the relationship between subjugated *campesinos* and the dominant Latin-American polity. Also ignored is the fact that while my claim to be “Latino” might be validated in the US, it would more than likely be rejected in my own homeland as the elite, *mestíza* classes (Peruvian-Latins) do not count dark-skinned Indians among their ranks. Thus, as I cross the literal border between the Americas a double invisibility takes place and I am absorbed into the nebula of American otherness.

So, while I entered the academy quite certain of my identity and positionality I quickly became mired in the maze of identity politics, forced to answer the proverbial question of Who am I? and the more political question of Who are you? As I worked on honing my responses to these questions, I began to realize that I was not alone in this quest and that nearly all of American Indian academe was besieged by the rancor of identity politics where the debate over who are the new Indians, who are the wannabes, who are the frauds, and who are the “real” Indians rages with great fury. Eventually, I became paralyzed by compulsions to claim every-thing, one-thing, and no-thing, and haunted by the prospect that I might inadvertently construct a “mistaken” identity. If

I claimed an Indian identity and spoke from the “authority” of that voice, I felt vulnerable to the challenges that the only “real” Indians are tribally enrolled, Northern Native Americans raised in reservation communities, and to the charges from the Latino community that I must harbor some deep internalized oppression that prevents me from assuming my “true” identity among them. Yet, if I claimed a “Latino” identity I not only felt as if I were being untrue to who I was but stood to betray my family, my clan, the Quechua people, and all of our careful journeys in the footsteps of our ancestors.

I feared that what I had to contribute would be viewed as immaterial in comparison with whether or not I claimed the proper identity cache and assumed the correct (read: most authentic) voice or otherwise suffer the inevitable penalties dispensed by the ever-present identity police. As a result, for the first couple of years of my postdoc status I lived in a state of arrested development, obsessing myself into private turmoil and public silence.

Ironically, I found salvation from this discursive nightmare in the intolerance of the nondiscursive world. That is, in spite of the multicultural checklist, I am a dark-skinned woman with undeniably Indian features and, thus, inherit and incite all the prejudices, stereotypes, and racist assumptions that such a persona elicits. And so, on any given day, introspective musings over my identity portfolio were invariably interrupted by some random act of racist ignorance – kids donning Chief Wahoo gear “whooping” as I passed by, New-Agers stalking me in search of “authentic” Indian wisdom – or by more serious permutations of institutional racism such as having to defend American Indian history as an integral part of “American” history, and to defend students fighting to exist in a climate where such a claim is not readily recognized. In other words, the real existing world never afforded me the luxury of academic perseveration.

As a result, I have entered the world of academe feeling somewhat like Ebenezer Scrooge: haunted by specters of my (academic) past, present, and future. In the past, I remember myself as a not-so-wide-eyed, long-haired, red-skinned girl, as an integral player within a larger body of black, brown, and red insurgency, and as a political mobilizer of various insurrections against the system. I made my way through school and the academy by defying them, by precariously playing with the space between the hard letter of the law and the softer codes of the institution. As I fought against what felt like an imprisoning system I remained unconscious and unappreciative of the freedom that I did have; the freedom of detachment, of clearly drawn lines between “us” and “them”, and a freedom to construct an anti-institutional, anti-establishment identity.

I have since crossed that line – the border between us and them – and, from this moment forward, I have been duly aware that there is no turning back. My present is now filled with mostly White, mostly male, mostly privileged subjects, nominally distinguishable from those I used to view through the scope of my intellectual artillery. Despite their official policies of openness and inclusion, I regularly encounter scholarly ghettos vigilantly patrolled by academic stars and their devotees, and as I observe from the margins I can’t help but feel a little like Dorothy – it has been a long, hard journey to Oz only to find these people behind the curtain.

The ghost of my academic future taunts me with questions I once thought were put to rest. Am I prepared to endure the necessary sacrifices required for successful passage over the tenure wall? Is the academy the optimal place or most strategic location from which to launch revolutionary salvos and political campaigns for social justice? What is gained from becoming even a marginal part of the same establishment I used to fight so vehemently against, and perhaps most importantly is it worth what is lost? Finally, even

if I answer all of these questions in the affirmative, where are the points of entry and pathways of sustainability for a young Indígena, a critical theorist, committed to Indigenous knowledges and the construction of a new *Red Pedagogy*?

Part II: Theory meets experience

The foregoing narrative describes a slice of my personal struggle with the politics of identity, portraying a kind of existential drama depicting academic life for a young Indigenous scholar. In the space below I work to reframe, analyze and explain this experience in terms of the prevailing theories of identity, namely those frameworks that have emerged from (left) essentialist, postmodern, and critical theories.

While each of the theories provides a potential frame from which to construct a space for American Indian intellectualism, each also creates a new set of problematics. As such, each theory will be discussed not only in terms of its impact on the formation of contemporary American Indian identity but in terms of its effect on the arena of American Indian scholarship and intellectualism. Ultimately, the relationship between private identity formation, public academic voice, and the current conditions of American Indian life will be fettered out.

Left-essentialism and American Indian identity

Left-essentialism is merely a permutation of essentialist theory in which the categories of race, gender, and other social groupings are viewed as stable and homogeneous entities, or as if the members of such groups possess some unique or innate set of characteristics that sets them apart from “Whites” (McCarthy, 1995). Such essences are, in effect, viewed as prima-facie indicators of authenticity by which degrees of authority are assigned based on levels of “purity.”

Through the frames of essentialism, my own struggle with the politics of identity can only be interpreted as an existential crisis; a profoundly intimate and deeply personal search into the catacombs of the self. The prevailing notion of the essential or authentic American Indian – as a pure-blood pedigreed individual raised in a reservation community – set the stage for my confusion, locating the struggle for identity in self. The “problem” of identity is configured as something only I am in control of, or in the current vernacular as something for me to “own.” In other words, the issue of sociopolitical identity is lost in a psychological maze from which essentialist discourse offers virtually no relief. Essentialism’s particularistic, if not idiosyncratic, roots read my existential crisis, at best, as some sort of personal psychological journey and, at worst, as that of a multicultural subject caught in the crossfire between essentialist pundits and postmodern creeds proclaiming “can’t we all just get along?”

Ultimately, essentialist discourse conscripts the political into the personal, and fails to provide any refuge from the dizzying dialogics of identity politics but, more importantly, it obscures its own role in the ongoing subjugation of Native scholars and their communities. For instance, even in this time of multicultural America, Indigenous peoples are typically recognized in stereotypical forms: as teepee dwelling, buck-skinned warriors, and exotic maidens. Numerous scholars, Indian and non-Indian alike, have revealed the maintenance of these essences as an integral piece of the overall project of domination by which American Indians have remained held to the “polemical

and creative needs of Whites” (Berkhofer, 1978; Deloria, 1970). In other words, the notion of the “authentic” Indian is a myth constructed and perpetuated by Whitestream America.

Vine Deloria (1970) argues that the predominant image of the American Indian – the nature-loving, noble savage – has persisted to serve Whitestream America’s need to escape the deadening effects of modernity. He writes:

(Whites) are discontented with their society, their government, their religion, and everything around them and nothing is more appealing than to cast aside all inhibitions and stride back into the wilderness, or at least a wilderness theme park, seeking the nobility of the wild savage who once physically fought civilization and now, symbolically at least, is prepared to do it again. (p. 34)

Deloria’s somewhat cynical reference to the “wilderness theme park” describes the propensity of the Whitestream to satisfy its need for “authenticity” via climate-controlled, voyeuristic tours through the lives and experiences of “authentic” peoples. In this instance, “discontented” Whites maintain psychological control over the overconsumption of modern society by requiring Indians to remain nature-loving primitives.

The project of defining a contemporary Indian identity is, thus, highly complicated and mediated by forces within Whitestream America, most notably racism and the homogenizing effects of global capitalism. As such, I argue that the perceived existential crisis is actually a crisis of power – the power to name, shape, and control the products and conditions of one’s life and, particularly of one’s labor. Such a crisis requires a politics of difference that places the human subject in dialectical relationship with the historical-materialist whole (i.e., the social, political, historical, economic, and cultural forces). An essentialist discourse that remains fixated on the individual fails to conceive the sociopolitical whole and, in this way, leaves little room for social transformation and revolutionary coalition. In order for coalitions to build – particularly among Indigenous peoples – a theoretical perspective is needed that not only views the personal as political but views the political as deeply informed by the structures of global capitalism. It needs to be recognized that to survive in this economy as an Indigenous scholar is to learn to negotiate a racist, sexist marketplace that exploits the labor of signified “others” for capital gain.

Essentialism and American Indian intellectualism

The impact of essentialist discourse and its misperceived struggle over authenticity is perhaps best seen in the myriad of turf wars currently playing out among subaltern scholars of color and Whitestream academics. Questions of who is Indian enough, Black enough, or otherwise subjugated enough to write and speak for the marginalized seem to dominate such circles. In terms of American Indian scholarship, battle lines have been drawn between Indigenous scholars working to claim intellectual sovereignty and Whites working against the essentialist grain to sustain and re-assert the validity of their own scholarship. To a large extent, such campaigns are simply the logical consequences of centuries of intellectual hegemony and academic colonialism where Whites defined Indian history and American Indians served as the objects of definition. Thus, to some degree, the current renegotiation of this pattern represents a good and necessary feature of the process of reclamation and emancipation.

The problem, however, is that since racial groups are not stable or homogeneous

entities and racial differences are equally unstable effects of social and economic contradictions, the matter of “drawing lines” becomes equally fraught with the same power-politics inherent in the system of Whitestream imperialism. Without the structures of a broader cultural critique, subjects are left to duke it out over the relativistic discourses of voice and authenticity. More significantly, the endless struggles over legitimacy have been so consumed with the “messenger” that the all important “message” has long been forgotten. This is not a small, or simple, outcome as messages from Indian country need to be heard, particularly as assaults on tribal land, resources, and rights continue to be waged. The issue of identity is, thus, not incidental but, in fact, central to the state of American Indian intellectualism and scholarship.

It should be self-evident that the problem of forging a contemporary Indian identity has become, in part, a problem of resisting the images and fantasies of Whitestream America. As Deloria (1970) notes, the expectation is that Indigenous peoples will retain their nature-loving, noble-savage identities, so that if you are Indian and choose to earn an advanced degree, accept a job away from home, do rigorous research, or teach in the “hard” sciences (as opposed to Native Studies or Social Sciences) your legitimacy will, at some point, be questioned.

The authenticity factor is opportunistically employed by the academy, determining the opportunities for, and labor conditions of, production among American Indian scholars. For instance, Indigenous scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (1998) questions why the same editors and agents who solicit her “life story” also routinely reject her scholarly work. She writes: “While I may have a reasonable understanding why a state-run university press would not want to publish research that has little good to say about America’s relationship to tribes . . . I am at a loss to explain why anyone would be more interested in my life story (which for one thing is quite unremarkable) . . .” (p. 121). The explanation, of course, is that the marketable narrative is that which subscribes to the Whitestream notion of Indian as romantic figure, and not Indian as scholar and social critic. American Indian intellectualism not only does not sell but also remains a threat to the myth of the ever-evolving democratization of Indian–White relations and to the notion that cultural genocide is but a remnant of America’s distant past. By exerting control over the mass-marketed image of American Indians, Whitestream publishers maintain control over the epistemic frames by which Indians are defined and, in effect, control over the fund of available knowledge on American Indians.

Hence, gaining recognition as an American Indian scholar often comes at a price: that writings be accessible and pre-packaged for ready consumption by the Whitestream. In demand is the academic equivalent of *Squanto* or *Dances With Wolves*; or what is often referred to as *Indian-lite* (as in “Bud-Lite”) scholarship. American Indian authors who engage in such work are typically viewed within the American Indian community as being complicit in the overall dehumanization of Indigenous peoples or, in the vernacular, as “sell-outs.” At the same time, however, such works often find their way to bestseller lists. Thus, Native scholars are often faced with a choice, to either contribute to the fund of Indian-lite scholarship, gaining legitimacy within the Whitestream and thereby increasing chances for promotion and tenure but decreasing legitimacy in the Indian community; or publish exclusively with Native presses, gaining respectability within the Indian community, but risking the denial of tenure and promotion on the basis of limited publication with “highly competitive” (read: Whitestream) journals.

In other words, the game is rigged. The space for American Indian intellectualism is conscripted by academic colonialism and the essentialist fascination with “authentic”

subjectivities. The end result is that the American Indian story continues to be constructed as a romantic narrative of noble savages and stoic maidens while the political, economic, cultural, and social subjugation of America's First Nations continues to be ignored.

Ultimately, the antitheoretical structures of essentialism offer limited insight to the broader relationship between American Indian intellectualism and the academy, and virtually no further understanding of the relationship between Indian academics and tribal America. In addition to its inability to provide an explanatory critique or construct transformative knowledge, the essentialist rejection of a broader historical critique serves, first, to privilege the essence of the American Indian as constructed by White America; second, to deny the objective reality of American Indian-ness; and, third, to function as an alibi for the existing social, political, and economic structures. If such effects are to be countered, a theoretical basis – by which explanation and transformation of the existing social, political, and economic forces operating within and against American Indian communities is possible – is critical.

Postmodern theory and American Indian identity

Postmodern theorists critique essentialist constructions of race (and other identity categories) and, instead, maintain that “identity” is shaped and determined by social and historical contingencies and not by some checklist of innate, biological, or primordial characteristics (DeLaurentis, 1989). Identity is, in other words, viewed as a highly relative construct acting out within a broader reality that resembles “a theater of simulation marked by the free play of images, disembodied signifiers and, the heterogeneity of differences” (Ebert, 1991, p. 15). Within this context, empiricist notions of knowable and absolute determiners of origin and authenticity dissolve and along with them, essentialist constructions of identity. In short, it asserts the “postmodern condition” as one in which grand narratives of legitimization are no longer credible.

As such, it appears that postmodernism provides a theoretical pathway out of the illogic of essentialism, however, the attack on grand narrative or totality is not without its drawbacks. Postmodernist constructions of identity as “free-floating” can result in an overblurring of boundaries, and its categorical rejection of grand narratives fails to distinguish the critical difference between master narratives of oppression and formative narratives that provide the basis for historically and relationally situating different groups within some common project (McLaren & Giroux, 1997). This aspect of postmodernist discourse not only reflects “an ontological agnosticism” that relinquishes the primacy of social transformation but also encourages a “epistemological relativism that calls for a tolerance for a range of meanings without advocating any single one of them” (McLaren, 1998, p. 242).

Such nihilistic tendencies present a real and significant threat to American Indian communities struggling to define their sociopolitical relationship to the United States. Unlike other subjugated groups, struggling to define their own local narratives within the democratic project, American Indians have not been working toward greater inclusion in the democratic imaginary but, rather, have been engaged in a centuries long struggle for the recognition of their sovereignty. This particular aspect of the Indigenous struggle completely transforms and reframes the identity question, moving it from the superficial realm of cultural politics to the more profound arena of cultural survival.

Contrary to postmodern readings, it needs to be recognized that American Indian communities that employ essentialist forms of identity policing do so not as an exercise in academic theory but as a means of patrolling against the wholesale appropriation of Indian culture and identity by global capitalistic forces that crave to market Native traditions at the same time they work to destroy all that sustains them (i.e., land bases, natural resources).⁷ Thus, while I do not advocate a return to essentialist logic and also recognize the way it works to undermine the overall project of liberation, I do wish to call attention to the potential dangers of postmodern identity construction as it interfaces with American Indian realities.

For example, it currently remains a fundamental truth of Indian reality – no matter how you define it – that the titles to Indian land remain in the hands of the U.S. government and in the name of industrialization and global capitalism, it has continued to be appropriated and seized by federal agencies. Furthermore, not only does the U.S. government routinely exercise the right to take away land and resources, it reserves the right to proffer federal recognition of tribal nations. So, 500 years after the European invasion, in order to retain status as a federally recognized tribe, individual nations repeatedly find themselves engaged in absurd efforts to prove (in predominantly White courts) their existence over time as stable and distinct peoples or as tribal groups. Thus, contrary to postmodern rhetoric, there are, in fact, stable markers and prima-facie indicators of what it means to be Indian in American society. Within this context, Indigenous scholars cannot afford to perceive essentialism as a mere theoretical construct or academic choice and may, in fact, be justified in their understanding of essentialism as the last line of defense against capitalistic encroachment and Western hegemony and the last available means for retaining cultural integrity and tribal sovereignty.

In terms of my narrative, the postmodernist critique of essentialism acts as an emancipatory rhetoric, liberating me and others previously silenced by private turmoil and public scrutiny. On the other hand, the relativizing effects of postmodernism obscure the slow dissolution of Native rights (if you cannot “objectively” define a people you cannot define their rights), allowing pernicious opportunism to be disguised as liberal open-mindedness. Moreover, the postmodernist rejection of grand narratives fails to consider the totalizing forces of the grand narratives of racism and global capitalism and their a priori effects on the formation of identity. In short, the question of how I choose to define myself is, in many ways, immaterial to the reality of how I am defined.

Postmodern theory and American Indian intellectualism

The fact that postmodernism fails to launch a systemic critique of the forces of racism and global capitalism renders it complicit in the ongoing oppression of American Indians, particularly as it relates to the labor conditions of Indigenous scholars. Issues of identity are at the forefront of academic publishing in which literary/cultural forms of Indian intellectualism have been historically favored over critical forms, and in which sanitized versions of Indian history are increasingly propagated by “wannabes” looking to cash in on the current marketability of Indian-ness. Indigenous scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (1998) argues that just as the rights to our land remain in the hands of the Whiteman government, the rights to our stories remain in non-Indian enclaves. Deloria (1998) similarly contends that what passes in the academic world as

legitimate scholarship on American Indians is often the product of “average scholars” (often White) advocating a predetermined, anti-Indian agenda.⁸

In addition to biased scholarship, there is a plethora of bogus scholarship proliferated by “fraudulent Indians” or White individuals with residuals of generic Indian blood and no tribal affiliation (Deloria, 1998). That “fraudulent Indians” have been allowed to corner the market raises the question of who controls access to the intellectual property of American Indian peoples. Deloria himself questions “who is it that has made such people as Adolph Hungry Wolf, Jamake Highwater, Joseph Epes Brown, Su Bear, Rolling Thunder, Wallace Black Elk, John Redtail Freesoul, Lynn Andrews, and Dhyani Ywahoo the spokespeople of American Indians?” (p. 79). He responds by naming Whitestream America as both patron and peddler of the Indian theme-park mentality. He writes, “they [the fraudulent Indians] represent the intense desire of Whites to create in their own minds an Indian they want to believe in...” (p. 79).

Deloria’s insights reflect the current state of affairs in Indian country where it has become so popular and, more significantly, *profitable* to be “Indian” that instances of “ethnic fraud” have reached far beyond academic circles. Ethnic fraud is a term used to describe the phenomena of Whitestream individuals who, in spite of growing up far removed from any discernible Indian community, decide to claim an Indian identity based on residuals of Indian blood in their distant ancestries. Claiming one’s ancestral background is not, in and of itself, problematic, but when such claims are opportunistically used to cash in on scholarships, jobs, set-aside programs and other affirmative economic incentives, it becomes a highly questionable practice – particularly when such “fraudulent Indians” quickly discard their new identity as soon as it no longer serves them. For example, recent studies conducted at UCLA (1988–89, 1993) reveal that of the 179 enrolled American Indian students, 125 did not or could not provide adequate documentation of their tribal affiliation and that, on average, less than 15% of American Indian students were enrolled in federally recognized tribes (Machamer, 1997). More importantly, a significant number of students who identified at the time of enrollment relinquished this identification by the time of graduation, suggesting that economic incentives aside, otherwise White students chose to reclaim their Whiteness (Machamer, 1997).

The practice of ethnic fraud is believed to have become so widespread that some Native organizations have felt compelled to devise statements and enact policies standing against its proliferation.⁹ Though such statistics and their implications need to be taken seriously, communities should be cautious of the ill-effects of identity fixation and note that surveillance tactics ultimately work against those they were designed to protect. Most importantly, obsessing over the politics of identity acts as a potent distracter from the deeper issues facing American Indian communities and as an effective deterrent to the building of political coalitions against Whitestream hegemony.

In short, postmoderism, its relativizing of difference and insistence that, at base, “we are all the same” has left American Indian scholars and their communities vulnerable to the forces of global capitalism. Thus, while I recognize the need to distill the cages of essentialism, it is imperative that other, more valid, measures of legitimacy be constructed so that the distinction of Indigenous peoples as tribal and sovereign nations is not lost.

A cost–benefit analysis of essentialist and postmodern discourse indicates the dire need for a revolutionary theory and praxis that addresses the political need for sovereignty and the socioeconomic urgency for building a transnational agenda. In these efforts, it is critical that American Indians work to maintain their distinctiveness

as tribal peoples of sovereign nations (construct effective means of border patrolling) while, at the same time, they move toward the building of political solidarity and coalition (construct effective means of border crossing). American Indian scholars can assist in this process, on the local level, by working to bring attention to the pressing concerns of Indian country and, on a global level, by working toward the development of a common theoretical base.

Critical theory and American Indian identity

In contradistinction to essentialism and postmodernism, critical theory offers a structural critique of U.S. society and its role within the global economy. Critical theorists (Darder, 1991; Ebert, 1996a, 1996b; 1991; Frankenberg & Mani (1993); Giroux, 1993; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Macedo, 1995; McCarthy, 1995; McLaren, 1997; Sleeter, 1996) critique essentialism and postmodernism as anti-theoretical treatments of difference and identity. Moreover, they argue that such de-historicized treatment of constructs so deeply embedded in the political, historical and material formations of power and production is at best ill-conceived and, at worst, a deliberate means of obscuring the sources of oppression and maintaining the status quo.

As opposed to constructing identity as either a fixed (essentialist) or free-floating (postmodernist) entity, critical theorists formulate identity as “subjectivity” or that which is “given birth through our participation in worldly events, through our sensuous orientation to and embodiment in a world informed by social relations and determinant processes of production” (McLaren & Giroux, 1997, p. 24). The subject, in other words, is only understood in terms of relationship, it is ephemeral, yet firmly grounded in the real world of social and economic forces. In this light, critical theorists argue that “particular cultural differences... are not as important as how such differences are embedded in and related to the large social totality of economic, social, and political differences” (McLaren, 1997, p. 7) – and contend that such a focus is imperative to the overall project of liberation. For example, the “particular cultural differences” of race and gender are not viewed as fixed determiners of human experience but, rather, as temporary, dynamic “signifiers and signs” of larger social and historical contradictions. The primary focus is, thus, not the particularities of experience or individual identity, but how the net of human experience can be engaged through a theory that takes the forces of oppression, resistance, and liberation seriously. Ideally, such a theory would also work to define an emancipatory praxis, revivify democratic citizenship, build solidarity across difference and produce historical knowledges that mark the transformability of existing social arrangements while maintaining the possibility of a different social arrangement – one free from exploitation (Ebert, 1996a).

Critical theory and its focus on the systematic relations of exploitation reveals the insufficient analyses provided by essentialist and postmodernist identity theories. Reconsidering the American Indian dilemma of whether to police or not police borders through the lens of critical theory exposes this ostensible “choice” as a false choice. Contemporary American Indians are about as “free” to define who we are as a people as we were “free” to come into compliance with the Dawes Act (1886) through which the U.S. government usurped the power to, once and for all, determine who counts as Indian and who does not. Critical theory provides a framework for analysis of these and other systematic relations of oppression, refocusing attention on the global parameters of Indigenous issues, namely the steady erosion of American Indian sovereign rights, lands, resources, languages and cultures.

While critical theory offers greater potential to ignite social transformation and support cultural revolution, certain forms are also clearly grounded in Marxist theory, rendering it problematic for American Indian scholars and their communities. With this in mind, just as Ebert (1996a) contends that feminists need to ask themselves the difficult question – in what ways have the knowledges and practices of White, middle-class feminists contributed and remained blind to the continued exploitation of poor women and women of color – I argue that White, middle-class advocates of critical theory need to examine how Marxist theory has contributed and remained blind to the historical conditions of Indigenous peoples.

Critical Theory and American Indian intellectualism

Insofar as the Marxist foundation of critical theory exposes essentialist notions of racial purity as clear impediments to the construction of emancipatory praxis and as ideological distracters from the sources of oppression it holds the greatest potential for helping to inform and shape emergent critical theories of American Indian liberation. It is, thus, curious that American Indian scholars have avoided engagement with the dominant discourses of critical theory. Generally speaking, Indian scholars have tended to concentrate on the production of historical monographs, ethnographic studies, tribally centered curriculums and site-based research. Such a focus stems from the fact that most American Indian scholars feel compelled to address the political urgencies of their own communities, against which engagement in abstract political theory appears as to be an unaffordable luxury and privilege of the Whitestream, academic elite.

While I recognize the need for practically based research, I argue that the ever-increasing global encroachment on American Indian lands, resources, and cultures points to the equally urgent need to build political coalitions and formulate transcendent theories of liberation. Moreover, while tribal needs are, in fact, great, I believe that unless the boundaries of coalition are expanded to include non-Indian communities, Indian nations will remain vulnerable to the whims of the existing social order. Nevertheless, this is not a call to “join the conversation” of critical theorists but rather a summons to American Indian scholars to initiate an Indigenous conversation that can, in turn, engage in dialectical contestation with revolutionary theory. In this way, I hope that the development of an Indigenous theory of liberation can itself be a politically transformative practice, one that works to transgress tribal politics and move toward the development of transnational Indigenous theories of liberation. Finally, as we engage in this process, it is perhaps in our best interest to heed the cautionary words of Indigenous scholar Mary Ritchie (1995), who writes, “when we speak the language of our oppressor, we must be aware of how we are being swallowed up by concepts we did not create [and that as] members of the nondominant community [we must] exercise caution and restraint in our attempts to develop our communities and enter the multicultural arena” (pp. 314–316).

Summary

While each of the dominant modes of identity theory – essentialist, postmodern, and critical – provides a potential framework from which to construct a space for American Indian intellectualism, each also creates a new set of problematics. While the clearly defined category of *essentialism* provides an important measure of protection against

ethnic fraud and, thus, protected spaces for American Indian scholars and their work, it also confines American Indian intellectualism to narrowly prescribed spaces, ossifying Indigenous subjectivity in the historical realms of the Whiteman imagination. *Postmodern* theorists question the whole idea of origin and work to disrupt the grand narrative of essentialism, providing greater opportunities for American Indian scholars and their work. The hyper-elastic and all inclusive categories of postmodernism, however, offer little to no protection against ethnic fraud or the wholesale appropriation of Indigenous culture and identity. *Critical theorists* ground identity, or subjectivity, in the broader contexts of historical materialism and global, patriarchal capitalism and, thus, offer greater insight to the market commodification of Indian-ness and the harsh realities of the racist, sexist, workplace that exploits Indigenous labor for capital gain. At the same time, critical theorists fail to address the current and historical tensions between American Indian intellectualism and Marxist, critical theories and, thus, unwittingly contribute to the absorption of American Indians in the democratic imaginary and the loss of American Indian distinctiveness as tribal, sovereign peoples. The shortcomings of the above theories point to the need for an Indigenous theory and Praxis, a new Red Pedagogy.

Part III: Praxis

Toward the development of a new red pedagogy

Several American Indian scholars have already begun to engage in theoretical discourse: Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (1998), Donna Deyhle (1995), Vine Deloria (1998), M. A. Guerrero (1996); Mary Hermes (1998), Devon Mihesua (1998), K. Tsianina Lomawaima (1994); Grayson Noley (1981), Frances V. Rains (1998, 1999), Karen Swisher (1998), Robert Allen Warrior (1995), and Laurie Anne Whitt (1998), are just a few of the scholars working to define critical theories of American Indian intellectualism. Though such efforts represent an important beginning, they have also been somewhat disconnected from each other and, if American Indian scholars are to formulate a critical ensemble of Indigenous theory, I believe that the emergent collectivity of critique will need to occur in a more deliberate and conscious manner. While the work of critical theorists and American Indian intellectuals shares a measure of common ground, namely, the shared rage against the inequities of the existing system, there are also significant points of tension that need to be examined. A formal, collective analysis of these tensions and intersections may be the best beginning in working to define a critical Indigenous theory of liberation.

Since I believe that such a venture necessarily needs to emerge as a collectivity of critique, I propose here merely to provide an outline of possibility. What follows is a synthesis of questions gleaned from the existing work of American Indian scholars as I contend that the formulation of Indigenous theories needs to be, first and foremost, grounded in our own intellectual traditions. From this starting point, I hope that other Native scholars, particularly elder scholars, will join in the struggle for a critical theory of Indigenous liberation, or the definition of a new Red Pedagogy. Finally, for the purposes of this discussion, I propose a working definition of Red Pedagogy as that which maintains: (1) the quest for sovereignty and the dismantling of global capitalism as its political focus; (2) Indigenous knowledge as its epistemological foundation; (3) the Earth as its spiritual center; and (4) tribal and traditional ways of life as its sociocultural frame of reference.

Thus, to begin, the central tensions garnered from the existing literature on American Indian pedagogy and critical theory are as follows:¹⁰ (1) the crisis of America (and now the globe) is viewed by Indigenous scholars as primarily a spiritual crisis, rooted in the increasingly virulent relationship between human beings and the rest of nature, whereas critical scholars view the “crisis” as being principally economic, rooted in the historical-materialist relations of capitalism; (2) American Indian scholars view the issues of sovereignty and self-determination as the central questions of education, whereas critical scholars frame education around issues of democracy and greater equality; (3) American Indian scholars, while recognizing the need to develop rationally based, critical theories of liberation, maintain the mind–body–spirit connection as paramount, whereas most critical scholars focus predominantly on the intellectual-political, somewhat on the aesthetic-affective, and hardly ever on the spiritual aspects of liberation.

The fundamental nature of these basic tensions illuminates the need for an examination of the relationship between Indigenous and Western ontologies. Some of the key issues in this process might be: (1) how are the voices, experiences, and subjectivities of Indigenous peoples transformed and reshaped when articulated through the epistemic and ontological frames of Western theory (i.e., postmodernism, post-structuralism, Marxism); (2) does a “revolutionary democracy” offer any assurances against the further erosion of Indigenous lands and treaty rights?; (3) to what degree do critical frameworks constrict Indigenous pedagogies fundamentally grounded in the land and have they differently articulated the anthropocentric foundations of other Western theories?

It is my hope that the nuances of such a discussion would reveal a common ground of struggle, resistance, and action. It seems, in this time of *Lau v. Nichols*, Proposition 187, Anti-Gay referendums, the Chiapas revolt, the Human Genome Project, global warming, and the plethora of standing cases between various American Indian nations and the U.S. government, that we cannot afford possibilities of coalition to pass us by. As Vine Deloria (1998) implores, “the next generation of American Indians must finally find a way to transcend the barriers of communication...” (p. 82).

Conclusion

I began this essay by painting a picture of my fears and ambivalence about entering the academy and becoming a professor. I questioned how to reconcile this new identity with other aspects of my life. There are many days when I can rationalize that there is a greater good being served by my sheer presence in the academy, by doing critical work at a predominantly White, elite institution, and by choosing to focus my activism in the academic arena. When I confide in my non-Indian colleagues, the usual response includes something about how I am being a good role model, about the importance of having scholars with a revolutionary spirit inside the academy, and how after tenure I will have more freedom to do community work. Perhaps all of that it is true, but it is also true that such a life plan is deeply rooted in Western individualism. It is not so much that my American Indian colleagues give me different advice as much as it is that they have a different level of awareness about the cost of “success” as measured by institutions of higher education, and I know that they too struggle with the question of whether or not it is all worth it.

When I try to tally the pros and cons for myself, it turns out that I cannot seem to distinguish between the two. For example, if I list in the pro column the fact that I have

learned a new theoretical language and have come to appreciate the advantages associated with this language, the more I think about it, the more I recognize that there has also been a cost to learning this language. For instance, while the language of Western theory has made it easier for me to understand the linear time-space continuum of Western history, I find that I have begun to lose my proficiency with transgressive forms of metaphoric language.¹¹

Overall the process has been slow and, to the undiscerning eye, undetectable but, all told, I sense now more than ever a growing distance between who I have become, and who my family, my people, and my ancestors are. Once, not too long ago, my dissertation advisor asked me as the culminating question of my defense, “all throughout this process Sandy you have talked about what you have lost... now, tell us about what you have gained.” All eyes turned to me as we sat in the dark confines of the small, wooden-paneled conference room and after what seemed like endless moments of silence I replied in a soft but measured voice, “I don’t know.” I continue to feel haunted by this question especially when I sit in my office, work at my computer, research in the library, or wander the grounds of this pristine collegiate campus. I wonder, what *have* I gained? Am I doing greater work for my people? Am I contributing to the health and welfare of my family and community? As a professor of education am I really working to make schools a better place for American Indian children? Can the classroom really be a site of revolutionary struggle and social transformation or will it always remain a tool of the social elite and politically conservative?

My vision for a new Red Pedagogy grows out of a sense of wanting, needing, to return to the questions that have persisted throughout my education and have continued in my role as a professor. In the beginning, I was perhaps unprepared to respond to those who urged me to be more objective, to research something less personal, but now I understand if my work is to have any meaning at all that it must evolve from the central concerns of my life. I believe that the time is ripe for American Indian peoples and scholars to engage in critical exchange and educational theory, to work hard at redefining the relationship between the academy and tribal America, between theoretical work and revolutionary struggle, and to infuse and further complicate the questions of liberty, democracy, and equity with Indigenous theories grounded in the Earth and its knowledge. Though I sometimes wonder and worry about the future of tribal America in this increasingly corporatized, capitalized, digitized, and cyberdized climate, I ultimately believe that it will prevail.

So for now, I find solace in knowing that, for me, this journey will not be about a quest for the holy grail of tenure, but rather a road – not unlike the yellow-brick one – that will eventually lead me back home. And so I proceed like the turtle, with caution and restraint, begin by placing my Western education alongside the *aya kachi*¹² and, instead, go forth in the spirit of my people.

Notes

1. Adapting from the feminist notion of “malestream,” Denis defines “Whitestream” as the idea that while American society is not “White” in sociodemographic terms it remains principally and fundamentally structured on the basis of the Anglo-European, “White” experience.

2. Marxist-Feminist scholar Teresa Ebert uses the term “Red Pedagogy” to refer to her own work toward revitalizing the Marxist critique. While I am in agreement with many of her observations, I employ the term “Red Pedagogy” to refer to an Indigenous intellectual critique.

3. Greg Cajete defines “ensoulment” as the expressed affective-spiritual relationship American Indian peoples have to the land.

4. Pachamama is the Quechua term for the land, or more accurately, Mother Earth
5. Illakuna is the Quechua term describing Indians who for various reasons are “absent” or “missing” from their homeland.
6. Proof of tribal enrollment in the form of “blood-cards” or tribal rolls is often viewed as proof of one’s authenticity. It should be noted that the practice of creating tribal rolls is historically rooted in the Dawes Act when the U.S. government sought an efficient means of allotting parcels of land, and essentially of destroying the traditional clan and kinship ties among Indigenous peoples. Owing to their different histories, such mechanisms were not exacted upon South American Indians. Ever since the decimation of the Incan Empire, Indian peoples of Peru have been primarily recognized by: (1) region – we are essentially all either Andean or rainforest people, (2) language – the vast majority of people are Quechua speakers, and (3) clan and kinship ties. Indians are thus “officially” recognized by their geographic and sociocultural locations and “unofficially” recognized by their dark-skinned bodies and Quechua speaking tongues.
7. For further insights to the marketing of Native America see Laurie Anne Whitt’s piece, “Cultural imperialism and the marketing of Native America,” in Devon Mihesuah’s (1998) *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*.
8. Deloria includes among such scholars: James Clifton, Sam Gill, Elisabeth Tooker, Alice Kehoe, Richard deMille, and Stephen Feraca.
9. In response to the growing phenomena of “ethnic fraud,” the Association of American Indian and Alaska Native Professors have issued a position statement urging colleges and universities to follow specific guidelines in their considerations of admissions, scholarships, and hiring practices.
10. Ward Churchill’s *Marxism and Native Americans* (1983); Devon Mihesuah’s *Natives and academics* (1998); Robert Allen Warrior’s *Tribal secrets* (1994); and Vine Deloria’s *God is red* (1994), among others, explore the relationship between critical theory and American Indian pedagogies and worldviews.
11. Example: In my pre-professor years, I was an artist by trade. Now, I find that anytime I am steeped in a research project I lose my ability to create, to see like a painter and to imagine new and possible worlds.
12. Aya kachi is the Quechua word for salts of the dead that were believed to be encased in giant stone walls. It is said that the Tawantinsuyu knew of their radioactive qualities and thus forbade their usage until the time when they could be used safely. In contemporary society, this story has become a metaphor symbolizing the need to treat new knowledge with great caution and to suspend all action until such knowledge could be used without risk to human life and nature.

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