

*They came for our land,
for what grew or could be
grown on it, for the resources
in it, and for our clean air
and pure water. They stole
these things from us, and in
the taking they also stole our
free ways and the best of our
leaders, killed in battle or
assassinated. And now, after
all that, they've come for the
very last of our possessions;
now they want our pride,
our history, our spiritual
traditions. They want to
rewrite and remake these
things, to claim them for
themselves. The lies and
thefts just never end.*

Margo Thunderbird, 1988

Colonialism, Genocide and the Expropriation of Indigenous Spiritual Tradition in Contemporary Academia

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The exploitation and appropriation of Native American spiritual tradition is nothing new. In many ways the process began the moment the first of Columbus's wayward seamen washed up on a Caribbean beach, returning home with wondrous tales of "los Indios." And it has been functioning in increasingly concerted fashion, under rationales ranging from the crassly commercial to the "purely academic," ever since. Over the past two decades the ranks of those queueing up to cash in on the lucre and lustre of "American Indian Religious Studies" have come to include a number of "New Age" luminaries reinforced by a significant portion of the university elite.

The classic example of this has been Carlos Castaneda (aka Carlos Aranja), whose well-stewed borrowings from Timothy Leary, the Yogi Ramacharaka and Barbara Meyerhoff were blended with a liberal dose of his own turgid fantasies, packaged as a "Yaqui way of knowledge," and resulted not only in a lengthy string of best-sellers but a Ph.D. in anthropology from UCLA. So lacking was/is the base of real knowledge concerning things Indian within academia that it took nearly a decade to apprehend Castaneda as "the greatest anthropological hoax since Piltown Man," and one still encounters abundant instances of *The Teachings of Don Juan* and *Journey Through Ixtlan* being utilized in courses and cited (apparently in all seriousness) in ostensibly scholarly

works as offering "insight" into American Indian thought and spiritual practice.

Then there is "Dr. Jamake Highwater," an alleged Cherokee/Blackfeet from either Montana or Canada (the story varies from time to time), born by his own accounts in several different years. In an earlier incarnation (circa the late sixties), this same individual appeared as "Jay Marks," a non-Indian modern dance promoter in the San Francisco area whose main literary claim-to-fame was in having penned an "authorized biography" of rock star Mick Jagger. Small wonder that the many later texts of "Dr. Highwater" on Native American spirituality and the nature of the "primal mind" bear more than a passing resemblance to the lore of Greco-Roman mythos and the insights of hip-pop idiom à la *Rolling Stone* magazine. Still, Highwater's material consistently finds itself required reading in undergraduate courses and referenced in supposedly scholarly fora. The man has also received more than one hefty grant to translate his literary ramblings into "educational" PBS film productions.

Then again, there was Ruth Beebe Hill, whose epic potboiler novel, *Hanta Yo*, set certain sales records during the late seventies via the expedient of depicting the collectivist spirituality of the 19th century Lakota as nothing so much as the

scarcely an Indian in the United States has not been confronted by some hippie-like apparition wishing to teach crystal healing methods to Navajo grandmothers, claiming to be a pipe-carrier reincarnated from a 17th century Cheyenne warrior, and with an assumed "Indian name" such as "Beautiful Painted Arrow" or "Chief Piercing Eyes."

living prefiguration of her friend Ayn Rand's grossly individualistic crypto-fascism. In the face of near-universal howls of outrage from the contemporary Lakota community, Hill resorted to "validating" her postulations by retaining the services of a single aging and impoverished Sioux man, Alonzo Blacksmith (aka "Chunksa Yuba"), to attest to the book's "authenticity." Before dropping once again into a well-deserved obscurity, Blacksmith intoned — allegedly in a dialect unknown to Siouxian linguistics — that what Hill had written was true because "I, Chunksa Yuba, say so, say so." This ludicrous performance was sufficient to allow a range of professors to argue that the controversy was really "just a matter of opinion" because "all Indians are not in agreement as to the inaccuracy of *Hanta Yo*." Such pronouncements virtually ensured that sales would remain brisk in supermarkets and college bookstores, and that producer David Wolper would convert it into a TV mini-series entitled *Mystic Warrior* during the mid-eighties.

And, as if all this were not enough, we are currently treated to the spectacle of Lynn Andrews, an air-head "feminist" yuppie who once wrangled herself a weekend in the company of an elderly Indian man of indistinct tribal origin. In her version of events he had apparently been waiting his entire life for just such an opportunity to unburden himself of every inner-most secret of his people's spiritual knowledge. He immediately acquainted Andrews with previously unknown "facts" about the presence of katchinas on the Arctic Circle and the power of "Jaguar Women," charged her with serving as his "messenger," and sent her forth to write a series of books so outlandish in their pretensions as to make Castenada seem a model of propriety by comparison. Predictably, the Andrews books have begun to penetrate the "popular literature" curriculum of the academe.

To round out the picture, beyond the roster of such heavy-hitters circle a host of also-rans extending from "Chief Red Fox" and "Nino Cochise" (real names and ethnicities unknown) to Hyemeyohsts Storm, David Seals and scores of others, each of whom has made a significant recent contribution (for profit) to the misrepresentation and appropriation of indigenous spirituality, and most of whom have been tendered some measure of credibility by the "certified scholars" of American universities. One result is that at this juncture, scarcely an Indian in the United States has not been confronted by some hippie-like apparition wishing to teach crystal healing methods to Navajo grandmothers, claiming to be a pipe-carrier reincarnated from a 17th century Cheyenne warrior, and with an assumed "Indian name" such as "Beautiful Painted Arrow" or "Chief Piercing Eyes." Needless to say, this circumstance has in turn spawned a whole new clot of hucksters

such as "Sun Bear" (Vincent LaDuke, a Chippewa) who — along with his non-Indian consort cum business manager, "Wabun" (Marlise James) — has been able to make himself rather wealthy over the past few years by forming (on the basis of sizeable "membership fees") what he calls "the Bear Tribe," and selling ersatz sweat lodge and medicine wheel ceremonies to anyone who wants to play Indian for a day and can afford the price of admission.

As the Sioux scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. put it in 1982:

the realities of Indian belief and existence have become so misunderstood and distorted at this point that when a real Indian stands up and speaks the truth at any given moment, he or she is not only unlikely to be believed, but will probably be publicly contradicted and "corrected" by the citation of some non-Indian and totally inaccurate "expert." More young Indians in universities are now being trained to view themselves and their cultures in the terms prescribed by such experts rather than in the traditional terms of the tribal elders. The process automatically sets the members of Indian communities at odds with one another, while outsiders run around picking up the pieces for themselves. In this way, the experts are perfecting a system of self-validation in which all sense of honesty and accuracy are lost. This is not only a travesty of scholarship, but it is absolutely devastating to Indian societies.

Pam Colorado, an Oneida academic from the University of Alberta at Lethbridge, goes further:

The process is ultimately intended to supplant Indians, even in areas of their own customs and spirituality. In the end, non-Indians will have complete power to define what is and is not Indian, even for Indians. We are talking here about an absolute ideological/conceptual subordination of Indian people in addition to the total physical subordination they already experience. When this happens, the last vestiges of real Indian society and Indian rights will disappear. Non-Indians will then "own" our heritage and ideas as thoroughly as they now claim to own our land and resources.

A Little Matter of Genocide

Those who engage in such activities usually claim to do so not for the fame and fortune (real or potential) involved, but for loftier motives. Many of Castenada's defenders, for example, have argued that despite the blatant misrepresentation of Yaqui culture in which he has engaged, his books nonetheless articulate valid spiritual principles, the "higher truth value" of which simply transcend "petty criticism" such as demanding at least minimal adherence to facts. Similar themes have been

sounded with regard to Highwater, Andrews and others. Within academia proper, such thinking has led to the emergence of a whole new pseudo-discipline termed "ethnomethodology" in which inconvenient realities can be simply disregarded and allegorical "truth" is habitually substituted for conventional data. Harold Garfinkle, a founder of ethnomethodology at UCLA has contended that such an approach represents "the pursuit of knowledge in its purest form."

At another level, the poet Gary Snyder, who has won literary awards for the penning of verse in which he pretends to see the world through the eyes of an American Indian "shaman," has framed things more clearly: "Spirituality is not something that can be owned like a car or a house," says Snyder. "Spiritual knowledge belongs to all humanity equally. Given the state of the world today, we all have not only the right but the obligation to pursue all forms of spiritual insight, and at every possible level. In this sense, it seems to me that I have as much right to pursue and articulate the belief systems developed by Native Americans as they do, and arguments to the contrary strike me as absurd in the extreme."

Indeed, the expression of such proprietary interest in native spiritual tradition is hardly unique to Snyder. For instance, at a 1986 benefit concert staged to raise funds to support the efforts of traditional Navajos resisting forcible relocation from their homes around Big Mountain, Arizona, one non-Indian performer took the opportunity between each of her songs to "explain" one or another element of "Navajo religion" to the audience. Her presumption in this regard deeply offended several Navajos in attendance and, during an intermission, she was quietly told to refrain from any further such commentary. She thereupon returned to the stage and announced that her performance was over and that she was withdrawing her support to the Big Mountain struggle because the people of that area were "oppressing" her through denial of her "right" to serve as self-appointed spokesperson for their spirituality. "I have," she said, "just as much right to spiritual freedom as they do."

Those who hold positions of this sort often go beyond assertion of their supposed rights to contend that the arguments of their opponents are altogether lacking in substance. "What does it hurt if a bunch of people want to believe they're the personification of Hiawatha?" asks the manager of a natural foods store in Boulder, Colorado. "I will admit that things can get pretty silly in these circles, but so what? People have a right to be silly if they want to. And it's not like the old days when Indians were being killed left and right. You could even say that the attention being paid these days to Indian religions is sort of flattering. Anyway, there's no harm to anybody, and it's good for the people who do it."

The traditional Indian perspective is diametrically opposed. As Barbara Owl, a White Earth Anishinabe, recently put it:

We have many particular things which we hold internal to our cultures. These things are spiritual in nature, and they are for *us*, not for anyone who happens to walk in off the street. They are *ours* and they are *not* for sale. Because of this, I suppose it's accurate to say that such matters are our "secrets," the things which bind us together in our identities as distinct peoples. It's not that we never make outsiders aware of our secrets, but *we* — not *they* — decide what, how much, and to what purpose this knowledge is to be put. That's absolutely essential to our cultural integrity, and thus to our survival as peoples. Now, *surely* we Indians are entitled to *that*. Everything else has been stripped from us already.

"I'll tell you something else," Owl continued:

a lot of things about our spiritual ways may be secret, but the core idea has never been. And you can sum up that idea in one word spelled R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Respect for and balance between all things, that's our most fundamental spiritual concept. Now, obviously, those who would violate the trust and confidence which is placed in them when we share some of our secrets don't have the slightest sense of the word. Even worse are those who take this information and misuse or abuse it for their own purposes, marketing it in some way or another, turning our spirituality into a commodity in books or movies or classes or "ceremonials." And it doesn't really matter whether they are Indians or non-Indians when they do such things; the non-Indians who do it are thieves, and the Indians who do it are sell-outs and traitors.

Former American Indian Movement (AIM) leader Russell Means not only concurs with Owl's assessment, but adds a touch of terminological clarity to her argument:

What's at issue here is the same old question that Europeans have always posed with regard to American Indians, whether what's ours isn't somehow theirs. And of course they've always answered the question in the affirmative. When they wanted our land they just announced that they had a right to it and therefore owned it. When we resisted the taking of our land they claimed we were being unreasonable and committed physical genocide upon us in order to convince us to see things their way. Now, being spiritually bankrupt themselves, they want our spirituality as well. So they're making up

rationalizations to explain why they're entitled to it.

"We are resisting this," Means goes on:

because spirituality is the basis of our culture; if it is stolen, our culture will be dissolved. If our culture is dissolved, Indian people *as such* will cease to exist. By definition, the causing of any culture to cease to exist is an act of genocide. That's a matter of international law: look it up in the 1948 *Genocide Convention*. So, maybe this will give you another way of looking at these culture vultures who are ripping off Indian tradition. It's not an amusing or trivial matter, and it's not innocent or innocuous. And those who engage in this are not cute, groovy, hip, enlightened or any of the rest of the things they want to project themselves as being. No, what they're about is cultural genocide. And genocide is genocide, regardless of how you want to "qualify" it. So some of us are starting to react to these folks accordingly.

For those who would scoff at Means's concept of genocide, Mark Davis and Robert Zannis, Canadian researchers on colonialism, offer the following observation:

If people suddenly lose their "prime symbol," the basis of their culture, their lives lose meaning. They become disoriented, with no hope. A social disorganization often follows such a loss, they are often unable to insure their own survival.... The loss and human suffering of those whose culture has been healthy and is suddenly attacked and disintegrated are incalculable.

Therefore, Davis and Zannis conclude:

One should not speak lightly of "cultural genocide" as if it were a fanciful invention. The consequence in real life is far too grim to speak of cultural genocide as if it were a rhetorical device to beat the drums for "human rights." The cultural mode of group extermination is genocide, a crime. Nor should "cultural genocide" be used in the game: "Which is more horrible, to kill and torture, or to remove [the prime cultural symbol which is] the will and reason to live?" *Both* are horrible. ♦

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