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

WARD CHURCHILL

be exploration and appropriation of Native American spiritual tradition is nothing new. In many ways, the
second began the recovery; the first of the
Colonialists wayward between washed up
on a Caribbean beach, regaining born
with wondrous tales of "her India." And it
has been functioning in increasingly con-
cerred fashion, under rationales ranging
from the easily commercial to the
"purely academic," ever since. Over the
past two decades the ranks of those
queuing up to cash in on the lucrative
and lucrative 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 Aranzas),
whose well-timed borrowings from Tim-
othy Leary, the yogi Ramacharaka and
Barbara Meyerhoff were blended with a
liberal dose of his own tarot fantasies,
packaged as a "Yaga 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 Pil-
down Man," and one still encounters
abundant instances of The Teachings of Don
Juan and Journey Through Indian Being uti-
ized 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. Jamesie Highwater,"
an alleged Cherokee/Blackfoot from ei-
ther Montana or Canada (the story varies
from time to time), born by his own ac-
counts 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 na-
ture of the "primal mind" bear more than
a passing resemblance to the lore of Gre-
cian 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, House 31, set
certain sales records during the late sev-
enties via the expedient of depicting the
collectivist spirituality of the 19th century
Lakotas as nothing so much as the

Margo Thunderbird, 1988
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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 Aya
Rand's grossly idiosyncratic crypto-fas-
cism. 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, Alton Blacksmith (aka "Chief Yukha"), to attest to the book's "authentic-
ity.

Such pronouncements were sufficient to allow a
crave of professors to agree that the con-
cept was, indeed, "just a matter of opin-
ion" because "all Indians are not in agree-
ment as to the inaccuracy of Hanta Yu.

In the midst of the mid-eighties,
and as if all else were not enough, we
were uniquely exposed to the spectacle of
Lyman Andrews, an airhead "feminist"
rapist who once wrangled herself a
womanhood in the company of an elderly
fellow of unidentifiable tribal origin. In
the interim, it was reported that he had apparently
been wasting his entire life for just such an
opportunity to suborn himself of every
innermost secret of his people's spiritual
wisdom. He immediately appeared on
the national scene with previously unknown "facts"
about the presence of kachinas on
the Arctic Circle and the power of "Jaguar
Women," charging her with serving as his
"messenger," and wrote her forth to write
a series of books so outlandish in their
pretensions as to make Castenada seen a
mock of propriety by comparison. Prec-
dictively, the Andrews books have begun
to penetrate the "popular literature" cur-
riculum of the academe.

To round out the picture, beyond the
roster of such heavy-hitters a circle of
hok-pana-aaa extending from "Chief Red Fox"
and "Nino Cocineh" (real names and
nicknames unknown) to Hyneeyohlto Storm,
David Seals and scores of others, each of
whom has made a signifi cant recent contri-
bution (for profit) to the misrepresenta-
tion and appropriation of indigenous spir-
itualities, and most of whom have been
tendered some measure of credibility by the
"certified scholars" of American uni-
versities. One result is that at this jun-
ture, scarcely an Indian in the United
States has not been confronted by some
hippie-like apparition wishing to teach
crystal healing methods to Navajo grand-
mothers, claiming to be a pipe-carrier
reincarnated from a 17th century
Cheyenne warrior, and with an assumed "Indian
ame" such as "Beautiful Painted Arrow" or "Chief
Piercing Eyes." Needless to say, this circumstance has in turn
spawned a whole new clow of hok-pana-

sounded a familiar refrain from a properly
toned, genteel voice. Nor did the conven-
tional rhetoric of the so-called "indige-
nous" spokespeople get appropriated by
Garrison Keillor at UCLP.

At the same time, those of us who had
been the target of the misrecogni-
tion of the word "Indian" were being
more cringingly called "nuisance, the
dead," and "hysterical" while the "experts"
belonged to a "non-existent" state of the
nation. All this was accomplished only by
a powerful, unacknowledged, and not un-
likely to be true, new Indian nation. The
Natives, so long the "it" in the story,
became the "them." Indians were, it is
hardly necessary to point out, first and
foremost, to "expel all whites" from
Navajo land. The opportunity was
presented by a management in-
dustry in order to "rattle the Indi-
and Although the manufac-
turers of this function are not
likely to be found in the public
domain, the results have been
unchallenged.

A Little Matter of Genocide

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

sound 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 putting 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 caught 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 areas 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 1966 benefit concealing that such an approach represents the "pursuit of knowledge in its purest form."

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 so 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:

about a lot of things about our spiritual ways may be secret, but the core idea has never been, And you can run up that idea in one word: spelled R-E-S-P-E-C-T. 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.

Those who hold positions of this sort often go beyond assertion of their supposed rights by that 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 religious 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 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 existing of any culture is to exist in 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 no amusing or trivial matter, and it's not innocent or innocuous. And those who engage in this are not cure, greedy, 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:

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.

Word Cherabell (Cree/Cherokee-Mohican) is Associate Professor of Communications and Coordinator of American Indian Studies with the Center for Studies of Ethnicity and Race in America (CSERA) at the University of Colorado at Boulder. His books include Marxism and Native Americans (1983); Culture Versus Economics (1984); Critical Issues in Native North America (1989) and Fantasies of the Master Race (1991).