

Spiritual Appropriation as Sexual Violence

In analyzing spiritual appropriation as a form of sexual violence, I start with what may seem a strange source: the Bible. The Hebrew word *YDH*, which translates as “to know a person, carnally, of sexual intercourse,” is used frequently in the Hebrew scriptures to connote sexual relations. For instance, Genesis 4:1 states: “now the man *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain saying, ‘I have produced’ a man with the help of the Lord” (NRSV). *YDH* colloquially refers to engagement in sexual relations. Inherent in this definition of “to know” is the sense that sexual intimacy conveys a profound knowledge of a person, but also that knowing a person intimately conveys a sense of sexual relatedness.

Consensual sexual relationships require the loosening of the boundaries of one’s physical and psychic space – they involve not only allowing another person to become close to you physically, but allowing her or him to know more about you. Sexual violence then suggests that the violation of these boundaries operates not only on the physical but on spiritual and psychic levels as well. In addition, sexual violence is ultimately structured around power

relations – it entails establishing the power to control someone’s life. Similarly, “knowledge” about someone also gives one power over that person. Withholding knowledge, then, is an act of resistance against those who desire to know you in order to better control you.

It is with this understanding of sexual violence that I wish to explore how the “New Age” movement and other forms of indigenous spiritual/cultural appropriation constitute a form of sexual violence. While there have been endless critiques of spiritual/cultural appropriation, I want to focus particularly on how it can be analytically understood as a form of sexual violence. I also wish to extend my discussion beyond the most obvious forms of appropriation as found in the New Age movement to explore its problematics in seemingly more innocuous forms, such as that found in academic religion classes.

Using this analytical framework, I would suggest that much of the energy directed toward “knowing” more about Native peoples can also be understood as concerns about what Mary Douglas terms, “matter out of place.”¹ That is, Native peoples as well as other people of color who continue to survive centuries of genocide are a constant threat to the dominant culture’s confidence that it will remain triumphant. Native peoples who continue to exist pollute the colonial body from the colonizer’s perspective – they are matter out of place. To fully understand, to “know” Native peoples is the manner in which the dominant society gains a sense of mastery and control over them.

Consequently, Indian communities are flooded with people who want to know more about them – New Agers looking for quick spiritual enlightenment, anthropologists eager to capture “an authentic culture thought to be rapidly and inevitably disappearing,”² and Christians eager to engage in interreligious dialogue. How one evaluates these attempts to understand and “know” Indians revolves in large part around how one analyzes the primary causes of the oppression of Native peoples. Many people believe that the primary problem Native peoples face is ignorance. That is, non-Indians oppress Indians because they are ignorant about the value of Native cultures. Under this paradigm, if only non-Indians knew more about Indians, they would be nicer

to them. This approach is typical of many books on Native religions. For instance, Dennis and Barbara Tedlock note in their *Teachings From the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy* that “the American Indian has already taught us a great deal... [but now we must learn] his more difficult lessons about the mind and spirit... We have to recognize that some of what he has to teach transcends cultural and historical boundaries.”³ Thus, even if one’s attempts to “know” more about Indians are problematic, we can assume that at least these attempts are a step in the right direction.

Without wanting to fashion too simplistic a dualism, I would suggest that the primary reason for the continuing genocide of Native peoples has less to do with ignorance and more to do with material conditions. Non-Indians continue to oppress Indians because Indians occupy land resources that the dominant society wants. The majority of energy resources in this country are on Indian land.⁴ The U.S. could not stop oppressing Indian people without fundamentally challenging its hegemonic position or multinational capitalist operations. If we frame Native genocide from a materialist perspective, then we have to rethink our analysis of ignorance about Native cultures on the part of non-Natives. This ignorance becomes a willful ignorance. The larger society will never become educated about non-Indians because it is not in their economic interest to do so. Thus, these efforts to “know” Indians seem less benevolent in their intent and in their effects.

Native spiritualities are land based – they are tied to the landbase from which they originate.⁵ When Native peoples fight for cultural/spiritual preservation, they are ultimately fighting for the landbase which grounds their spirituality and culture. For this reason, Native religions are generally not proselytizing. They are typically seen by Native peoples as relevant only to the particular landbase from which they originate; they are not necessarily applicable to peoples coming from different landbases. In addition, as many scholars have noted, Native religions are practice centered rather than belief centered. That is, Christianity is defined by belief in a certain set of doctrinal principles about Jesus, the Bible, etc. Evangelical Christianity holds that one is “saved” when one professes belief in Jesus Christ as one’s Lord and Savior. But what

is of primary importance in Native religions is not being able to articulate belief in a certain set of doctrines, but being able to take part in the spiritual practice of one's community. In fact, it may be more important that a ceremony be done correctly than it is for everyone in that ceremony to know exactly *why* everything must be done in a certain way. As Vine Deloria (Dakota) notes, from a Native context, religion is "a way of life" rather than "a matter of the proper exposition of doctrines."⁶ Even if Christians do not have access to church, they continue to be Christians as long as they believe in Jesus. Native spiritualities, by contrast, may die if the people do not practice the ceremonies, even if the people continue to believe in their power.

Native communities argue that Native peoples cannot be alienated from their land without committing cultural genocide. This argument underpins many sacred sites cases, although usually to no avail, before the courts. Most of the court rulings on sacred sites do not recognize this difference between belief-centered and practice-centered traditions or the significance of land-based spiritualities. For instance, in *Fools Crow v. Gullet* (1983), the Supreme Court ruled against the Lakota who were trying to halt the development of additional tourist facilities in the Black Hills. The Court ruled that this tourism was not an infringement on Indian religious freedom because, although it would hinder the ability of the Lakota to *practice* their beliefs, it did not force them to relinquish their beliefs. For the Lakota, however, stopping the *practice* of traditional beliefs destroys the belief systems themselves. Consequently, for the Lakota and Native nations in general, cultural genocide is the result when Native landbases are not protected.⁷

When the dominant society disconnects Native spiritual practices from their landbases, it undermines Native peoples' claim that the protection of the landbase is integral to the survival of Native peoples and hence undermines their claims to sovereignty. Such appropriation is prevalent in a wide variety of cultural and spiritual practices—from New Agers claiming to be Indians in former lives to Christians adopting Native spiritual forms to further their missionizing efforts. The message is that anyone can practice Indian spirituality anywhere, so there is no need to

protect the specific Native communities and their lands that are the basis of these spiritual practices.

The assumption that Native knowledge is for the taking is also evident in multinational corporations' continued assault on indigenous knowledge. Current intellectual property rights law only respects individual ownership and not community ownership over intellectual or cultural property. Nonindigenous entrepreneurs have been able to gather knowledge about indigenous plants, medicines, music, or other cultural knowledge and take it because it is understood as "public" property. By obtaining an individual patent or copyright for it, they effectively seize control over this knowledge and can profit from it. As Laurie Whitt describes in the case of indigenous music,

While others are free to copy the original indigenous song with impunity, were someone to attempt to copy the "original" copy (now transformed into the legally protected individual property of a composer who has "borrowed" it from the indigenous "public domain"), he or she would be subject to prosecution for copyright infringement. This includes any members of the indigenous community of the song's origin who cannot meet the requirement of "fair use."⁸

Thus, in this society, white people have clear legal boundaries over their knowledge, while indigenous communities have none. Native communities and their practices can be known to all; their boundaries are inherently violable.

As Rayna Green suggests, spiritual appropriation is a practice that is based on genocide. Non-Natives feel justified in appropriating Native spirituality and Native identity because they do not believe existing Native communities are capable of independently preserving Native cultural practices. Rather, the common belief is that Native peoples are vanishing, and white people must preserve indigenous cultural practices since Native peoples are unable to do so. Through cultural appropriation, white people establish themselves as the true inheritors of Indianness. As a result, they can lay legitimate claim to Indian lands. Green argues,

For I would insist now, the living performance of "playing Indian" by non-Indian peoples depends on the physical and psychological removal, even the death, of real Indians. In that sense, the

performance, purportedly often done out of a stated and implicit love for Indians, is really the obverse of another well-known cultural phenomenon, "Indian hating," as most often expressed in another deadly performance genre called "genocide."⁹

Exemplifying this ideology is the Improved Order of the Red Men, a white fraternal organization that has been in existence since 1765 in which participants, supposedly patterning themselves on the Iroquois Confederacy, wear "Native" regalia and take part in other "Indian" cultural practices. According to the group's Web site, www.redmen.org:

The Improved Order of Red Men is a national fraternal organization that believes in

- Love of and Respect for the American Flag.
- Preserving our Nation by defending and upholding the principle of free Government.
- America and the democratic way of life.
- Preserving the traditions and history of this great Country.
- Creating and inspiring a greater love for the United States of America.
- Helping our fellow men through organized charitable programs.
- Linking our members together in a common bond of Brotherhood and Friendship.
- Perpetuating the beautiful legends and traditions of a once-vanishing race and the keeping alive of its customs, ceremonies, and philosophies.

These people see themselves as preserving the "traditions of a once-vanishing race" for the purpose of preserving "America," which is built on the genocide of Native peoples.

Furthermore, the colonial relations that mark the relationship between indigenous communities and the dominant society that wants to "know" more about them are themselves structured by sexual violence. Haunani-Kay Trask, Native Hawaiian activist, argues that colonizers destroy the cultural base from which indigenous people resist colonization by commodifying it to meet Western consumerist needs. She terms the phenomenon "cultural prostitution."

"Prostitution" in this context refers to the entire institution which defines a woman (and by extension the "female") as an object of degraded and victimized sexual value for use and exchange through the medium of money... My purpose is not to exactly detail or fashion a model but to convey the utter degradation of our culture and our people under corporate tourism by employing "prostitution" as an analytical category... The point, of course, is that everything in Hawaii can be yours, that is, you the tourist, the non-native, the visitor. The place, the people, the culture, even our identity as a "Native" people is for sale. Thus, Hawaii, like a lovely woman, is there for the taking.¹⁰

In Trask's model, the exchange between Native and non-Native cultures is governed by the interests of non-Natives; that is, Natives exist to meet the needs of non-Native peoples, regardless of the impact on indigenous communities. Trask's exploitation model can also be applied to the first Re-Imagining Conference, held by the National Council of Churches in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1993. The conference was explicitly called so women could reimagine a non-patriarchal Christianity, yet Native women and Native practices were marginalized and disrespected. A group of women was invited to dance in traditional costumes, but Native women were not invited to speak on any struggles at any time during the conference. Native women had offered medicine bundles, which are to be treated with great respect, but the primarily white audience unceremoniously threw them on the floor. The women were to be voiceless objects of consumption, "there for the taking." They were, as Trask writes, "transformed to [be] complicitous in their own commodification."¹¹

It is particularly troubling when this colonial practice—which is structured by sexual violence—is adopted by white feminists in their efforts to heal from patriarchal violence. For this kind of appropriation hinders Native women in *their* healing and recovery, not only from personal abuse, but from the patterned history of abuse against their families, their nation, and the environment.¹² When white women appropriate Indian spirituality for their own benefit, they are participating in this pattern of abuse against Indian peoples' cultures.

Still, many non-Native peoples argue that they have a “right” to access Native spiritual knowledge. I taught a class where we discussed the issue of spiritual appropriation. The white students told me about how beneficial Native spirituality was to them, and that they felt they had to take part in certain New Age practices because there were no other suitable substitutes. So I asked, “Even if the New Age movement is as beneficial to you as you say, do you have any responsibility to Native communities when you take part in these practices?” What struck me was that none of the students had even considered this issue before. This practice of taking without asking, and the assumption that the needs of the taker are paramount and the needs of others are irrelevant, mirrors the rape culture of the dominant society.

Healing spiritual practices have not only been appropriated by the dominant society, but they have been sexually colonized as well. As Will Roscoe notes, colonizers have a long history of “documenting” what they see as sexual perversity in Native ceremonies in order to suppress them. Roscoe, a radical historian, points to the efforts to undermine John Collier, a white man who helped to establish the All-Pueblo Council in 1922 and served as executive secretary of the American Indian Defense Association in 1923. (Collier was later appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs by President Franklin Roosevelt.)

Collier attempted to protect Native religious freedom in the southwest despite widespread rumors that “Zuni men and women imitated sodomy in a dance, that boys and girls were put together ‘for unrestricted sexual intercourse,’ that the Taos Indians sacrificed two boys per year.”¹³ According to Roscoe, William Johnson, a one-time special officer of the Indian Office, desired to spread this “knowledge” about Indians to as widely as possible and wrote a 1924 letter to the *New York Times* that attacked Collier and charged that:

[B]oys and girls returned from Government schools are stripped naked and herded together entirely nude and encouraged to do that very worst that vileness can suggest; that at Zuni little girls were debauched in these dances; that Indian mothers, wives and daughters [are] ravished before hundreds of yelling, naked savages; and that little girls, too young and tender to be ravished,

have been whipped naked until their little bodies were bruised and covered with purple welts...and Indian boys were being withdrawn from government schools for a two years' course in sodomy under pagan instructors.¹⁴

This historical correlation between Native spirituality and sexual exploitation can be found in contemporary attitudes about Native people. For example, journalist Andy Rooney depicts Native spiritual traditions as involving “ritualistic dances with strong sexual overtones [which are] demeaning to Indian women and degrading to Indian children.”¹⁵ Along similar lines, Mark and Dan Jury produced a film, *Dances: Sacred and Profane* (1994), and advertised it as “climax[ing] with the first-ever filming of the Indian Sundance ceremony.” This so-called ceremony consisted of a white man, hanging from meat hooks from a tree, praying to the “Great White Spirit.” Then C.C. Sadist, a group that performs sadomasochistic acts for entertainment, appears in the film.¹⁶

Self-described Cherokee porn star Hyapatia Lee directed a pornographic film framed as a documentary titled *Native Tongue* (1999). The film begins with the statement, “Each of the girls is of Cherokee ancestry with teachings offered to all people.” Each scene depicts one of these “Cherokee” girls copulating with a white man. Hyapatia prefaces these scenes with, “I’m mostly Cherokee Indian. I was taught to worship nature and honor my traditional religion. They knew [past tense] how connected everything is.” As Rayna Green argues in “The Tribe Called Wannabee,” playing Indian is part of an ongoing genocidal project where white people become the inheritors of all that Indians “knew.” In this case, this inherited knowledge is limited to how Indians supposedly engaged in various sexual acts.¹⁷

The film then attempts to turn Native cultural/spiritual traditions into pornography. For instance, one scene begins with “Because we don’t see ourselves as superior to animals, we can learn from them,” which is followed by a couple having sex “doggy-style.” Other scenes depict couples smudging each other or smoking a pipe before engaging in sex. Finally, one scene begins, “The Indian culture teaches us the medicine path.” Viewers are then called to “honor the four directions, more commonly known as sixty-nine.”

Further trivializing women's status in Native communities, one scene begins with a talk about how Native communities respected women and men equally. "Father Sky wraps around Mother Earth." Christians, Lee continues, don't understand women's power. She proceeds to perform oral sex on a white man. Thus, symbolically the equality of men and women in Native societies is subordinated to the dominance of white men.

Finally, after repeated scenes of various pornographic acts, the "documentary" ends with "We hope this will be helpful for all our Anglo brothers. The teachings are meant for all. They are meant to keep us on the sacred path." In this conclusion, we can see how "knowledge" about Native communities is explicitly tied to sexual exploitation. Native communities have no boundaries, psychic or physical, that the dominant society is bound to respect. What Native peoples have and know are not under their control; it must be shared with all, particularly our "Anglo brothers."

Another "self-described Cherokee," Harley Swiftdeer, markets sex orgies as Cherokee ceremonies. He promotes "fire breath orgasms," which he contends are a regular part of Cherokee ceremonies and have been passed down through the "Twisted Hairs Metis Medicine Society Council of Elders." According to the promotional material:

Originally established in 1250 B.C. as the Rattlesnake School of Turtle Island, the Twisted Hairs Metis Medicine Society Council of Elders is a body of shamans, medicine men and women, sorcerers and magicians from many tribes throughout North, Central and South America, who have traveled and studied beyond their traditional tribal boundaries and evolved to levels of great learning, wisdom, power and knowledge. Turtle Island is called the Southwest Power, one of the Eight Great Powers of knowledge and wisdom on the planet. At times throughout history the magical mystery schools were forced to take their teachings and knowledge "underground" for safekeeping because they were being misused by others for personal power and domination or perverted by religious hierarchies. This happened here on Turtle Island following the Spanish conquest by Cortes, Pizarro, and others, as well as the invasion of Europeans onto the North American continent.

In 1975, hearing the call of Grandmother Earth and seeing both the need and the readiness within the collective, the Elders of the Council decided to again release the first of many Wheels and Keys of this Sweet Medicine SunDance Path so that these teachings would be available to anyone seeking personal growth and spiritual awakening. The Council designated SwiftDeer as one of the Carriers of the Shields of Knowledge of this Path...

In July of 1992, SwiftDeer was seated and sealed as a Twisted Hairs elder on the Council.¹⁸

Swiftdeer's "Cherokee" sex teachings have been integrated into a variety of seminars including the "Spiritual Sexuality" workshops conducted by the GoldenWind Dreamers Lodge based in Phoenix, Arizona.¹⁹ This sexual colonization of Native spirituality cloaks itself in the rhetoric of resistance to colonization.

In these sites of sexual exploitation, Native peoples are constantly equated with nature, which is in turn equated with unbridled sexuality. The various instructive scenes in *Native Tongue* are all interspersed with nature scenes. As Lee states, it was because her people "worshiped" nature that they learned to engage in wild sex. Similarly, the handbook *Indian Love Signs* (1999) purports to show how "Native American astrology can help you find someone to love."²⁰ This pan-Indian astrological system appears to be based on Sun Bear's medicine wheel. It is virtually indistinguishable from the traditional zodiac except that it is "directly related to nature," and is concerned only with giving the reader information on her/his love life.

Similarly, Jack Glover's *Sex Life of the American Indian* (1973) purports to describe the mating patterns of Native peoples, presuming the Native world is homogenous in its practices. "The material I obtained I kept factual for the historian, I kept spicy for the casual reader and above all, the material in this volume is for the reader interested in the Sex Life of the American Indian." What distinguishes the sex life of the American Indian is that "the Indian had an animal-like nature because a lot of them patterned themselves after the wildlife in the forest." He then describes how Indians like to show off because they hung around wolves. According to Glover, when Native peoples intermarry with Black people, who are perhaps even more "animal-like," this "mixture

of Negro and Indian blood produced some of the worst outlaws the Indian nation ever knew."²¹

The Mending the Sacred Hoop Stop Violence Against Indian Women Technical Assistance Project in Duluth, Minnesota notes that one difficulty in organizing against sexual violence in Native communities is that many community members believe that it is "traditional," despite the historical evidence which suggests sexual violence was rare in Native communities prior to colonization. One can see how these books and videos promote the internalization of violence in Native communities. For instance, Glover's account of Native communities suggests that Native women were nothing more than commodities. Rape was unheard of in many tribes, he argues, not because Native women were respected, but because it was just commonly understood that Indian women had to be sexually available whenever men wanted them to be. Fathers are described as having sex with their daughters. "The daughters didn't mind as they seemed happy and satisfied." If a man rapes a woman besides his wife, his wife "might welcome it, to keep him off her for awhile." Men had complete license to kill their wives: "The Indian man had the final say about anything that went on in camp and elsewhere. When he wanted he could kill his wife."²²

Native communities, where violence against women was relatively rare, are depicted as hotbeds of abuse and violence. This reversal becomes internalized within Native communities themselves, evident in the proliferation of "plastic medicine men" who are often notorious for sexually abusing their clients in fake Indian ceremonies. After Jeffrey Wall was sentenced for sexually abusing three girls, he claimed the abuse was part of American Indian spiritual rituals he conducted as an Indian medicine man.²³ David "Two Wolves" Smith and Alan Campnhey "Spotted Wolfe" were also charged for sexually abusing girls during supposed "cleansing" ceremonies.²⁴ In 1998 an Omaha priest, Daniel Herek, was convicted for using Catholic and "Native American ceremonies" as a pretext for sexually abusing a boy for five years. Herek and this boy formed their own "tribe" called the "Pondering People." The boy called himself "Pondering Raven" and the priest called himself "Wolf Hawk." Herek then repeatedly asked him to take

part in "Native American" rituals involving the boy removing his clothing so Herek could fondle him.²⁵ Michael Rea in Larimer County, Colorado, posed as a Lakota Medicine Man and offered to teach the children in his apartment Native spiritual practices. He was later charged with sexually abusing children in these sessions.²⁶

Bonnie Clairmont, a Ho-Chunk based in St. Paul, Minnesota, is doing groundbreaking work by exposing sexual exploiters who claim to be spiritual leaders. Unfortunately, not all these spiritual leaders are obvious "wannabes". Some are Native men who are respected in their community. Because she has not been afraid to address this abuse, Clairmont has been widely criticized. But she continues to hold conferences and speak out on these kinds of abuses. At one of Clairmont's conferences, one elder suggested that the New Age movement has helped to create conditions ripe for sexual exploitation within "traditional" spiritual ceremonies. That is, New Age spirituality promises quick-fix solutions by "powerful" shamans who know all. As a result, people seeking guidance learn to surrender their authority to so-called leaders and disregard warning signs when their boundaries are violated. This leader concluded, "I am no one special. When you come to see me, do not leave behind your common sense."

Spiritual Appropriation Is Hazardous to Your Health

Because Native spiritual traditions are practice centered, it is critical that ceremonies be performed correctly in order for the well-being of their participants to be ensured. Otherwise, the effects can be detrimental. I have heard many elders express concern about the non-Native practitioners who dabble in Native spiritual practices, because they do not fully comprehend the possible consequences of their actions, and it is likely that something bad will happen if ceremonies are not performed correctly.

The dangers of appropriation are evident in several recent incidences involving non-Indian practitioners. As one example, Kirsten Dana Babcock, 34, of Redding, California, and David Thomas Hawker, 36, of Union City, California, were participating in a ritual resembling a sweat lodge when they died of asphyxiation in 2002. They completely sealed the "sweat lodge" in plastic for a four-hour cleansing ritual, chanting amid the vapors of herbs and water poured over the hot rocks. The sweat lodge was made of a wooden frame shaped in a near-circle, about 10 feet in diameter, and covered with plastic sheeting. The sheeting was buried in the ground around the lower edge to make it airtight, and the plastic was covered with sleeping bags and blankets to keep in the heat. The surviving participants told officers that they were seeking spiritual enlightenment by sitting in the steam in the sealed environment.²⁷

As Tony Incashola, director of the Flathead Reservation cultural committee, states in the Native Voices Public Television film, *White Shamen, Plastic Medicine Men* (1995):

In my culture, it has always been taught that when you don't respect, you don't show respect, you don't treat things properly, in the end it comes back on you. In the end, it will hurt and destroy you in some way. And I believe the punishment, whether it be today, tomorrow, or somewhere down the line will come back on you.

New Age and the Academic Study of Religion

In academic circles, I have noticed that academicians often criticize New Agers and others who exploit Native spirituality and culture. However, in this analysis, I also want to point to how the academic study of Native religious traditions can unwittingly support this paradigm of sexual violence that undergirds the manner in which non-Indians attempt to "know" Indians. Just as those who sexually dominate others often contend that if they enjoyed the act, then "she must have wanted it," some academics assume that if they want to study Native communities, the com-

munities must want that as well. A link between the ethnographic imperative that guides the study of Native peoples and sexual violence can be seen in the Greek translation of the Hebrew words (YDH) which can be found in the Septuagint. It translates into "to know by seeing through the mind's eye," and is the perfect form of the word which means "to see." The forceful act of gazing at the other, gaining knowledge and control over her by seeing her, is likened to sexual intimacy. Thus, the ethnographic gaze can be understood as the act of sexually possessing a people.

The assumption that this pursuit is inherently positive undergirds academic treatments of Native religious tradition. As Cree historian Winona (Stevenson) Wheeler notes, Western-based academics place a high value on procuring "knowledge" or the "truth" as a goal in and of itself. By contrast, knowledge does not confer the right to communicate that knowledge to outsiders in Native communities:

One of the major tenets of Western erudition is the belief that all knowledge is knowable. In the Cree world all knowledge is not knowable because knowledge is property in the sense that it is owned and can only be transmitted by the legitimate owner... . You can't just go and take it, or even go and ask for it. Access to knowledge requires long-term commitment, apprenticeship and payment. As a student of oral history, in the traditional sense, there is so much I have heard and learned yet so little I can speak or write about, because I have not earned the right to do so. I cannot tell anyone or write about most things because it has not been given to me. If I did it would be theft. So I'll probably be an Old Lady before I am allowed to pass it on. By then, I'll have learned all those rules of transmission and will probably feel impelled to keep it in the oral tradition and not write it down.²⁸

Often, researchers have not asked "Do Native people want others to know about them?" or "Do Native communities find this research helpful to them?" As a result, tribal communities are beginning to place restrictions on what kinds of information should be provided to outsiders; many are developing additional protocols or taking other proactive steps regarding research that is done in their communities. For example, at a 1998 conference on biopiracy held at the Salish/Kootenai College in Montana,

representatives from a tribal community reported that a researcher visited their reservation reporting that he had been given a grant to study them, even though he had not shared his research proposal with the community before he received funding. The tribal council contacted the agency that funded the researcher and convinced the organization to retract the funding and redirect it to the tribe to conduct its own research.

I would suggest that most people studying Native religions do so to support Native communities. However, we have inherited a colonial model of teaching, researching, and learning that undermines this approach. Not surprisingly, there is often a very sharp disjuncture between how Native people learn spiritual knowledge in their communities and the learning models we use in teaching college classes. Within the community, I always hear elders say, if you want to learn, be quiet and pay attention. Only through being part of the community over a period of time and developing trust does the knowledge come to you—very slowly. Meanwhile, in the classroom setting, we are encouraged to present the information very quickly and completely so that students can learn it for the final. Consequently, we promote the misperception that Native traditions are easily learned, can be learned quickly, and can be learned outside of a community context. I have lost count of the number of students who have informed me that they know all about Indians because they took one class on Indian religions in college. They also seem to learn from classes that they are entitled to learn whatever they want from Native communities; again, that Native communities have no boundaries that non-Natives need to respect. It is interesting to think about alternative models that might resemble indigenous methodologies of learning. A story set in an Ojibwe community that my sister shared with me hints at such an alternative approach:

In this community, there was a respected elder who knew all about cliff drawings and rock paintings as well as where they were located on the reservation. A young man who was interested in learning about traditional ways went to the elder and asked if the elder would teach him. So the elder agreed to teach him. He would take this young man on long walks to where the rock paintings

were and take great care in uncovering them. He would then tell him a little about the paintings. Then, he would take great care to cover them up again before they took a long walk home. This went on for some time before the young man said, "We could save a lot of time if we just stayed here and you told me what the paintings all mean." To this, the elder replied that walking to the paintings and taking care of them was as important to understanding the traditions as was hearing about what they meant. Simply knowing facts was not enough; Native traditions are a way of life, and you have to know everything about the way of life. It wasn't just about information, it was about a way of being. Whatever comes easy, you do not value. He concluded: "It is not enough for you to understand the traditions, you must learn how to respect them."