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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric scholars must open space for the unheard counter-stories of American Indians, which exist alongside the echo of American-ness that implicates all people in this country. As the scholarly discourse of the academy itself is situated within a framework of the American narrative of conquest and imperialism, scholars must recognize that they are part of the system of denial, the "un-seeing" of the American Indian and his or her story that challenges this master narrative. Michael Dorris points out the "conviction that the West holds a virtual monopoly on 'science,' logic and clear-thinking" writes a singular narrative for the Indian scholar whose work is about some aspect of Indian culture. The academic valuing of Western "objectivity" is used to narratively mark (usually with asterisks and italics) the Indian who studies his or her own culture. Limited by the type of story he or she can tell, the American Indian is in an impossible bind. However, there are some stories that can be told, mixed blood stories told from the borders of Indian-ness, American-ness, and Scholarly-ness. These stories operate across institutions and ideologies constructed by narratives, across frontiers/borders/boundaries. This is a place for the "theorhetoric," a mixed blood rhetoric that works through theories of history, anthropology, and literature to assemble a border-situated web of tactics with which various constructions of American Indian rhetorics can be accessed. (TB)

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The title of this paper is -- **Native AmerIndian Theor(h)etoric: The Periphery Speaks** . It is a trickster title, layered with words that are used by the Academy to represent an object of study. "Indian," "Native American," and "AmerIndian." In creating it, I had in mind a talk that would begin to think about what it might mean to "do" American Indian Rhetoric in this postmodern age of Victor Vitanza's "post-philosophical rhetoric." And in thinking this proposition through, I began to understand that to "do" Indian Rhetoric meant thinking about what it is that we do when we study -- or "do" -- Indians within the larger framework of the Academy. So, in the next 19 or so minutes, I'm going to think aloud about some of the narratives that shape our acholarly understanding of Indians within the Academy, and I'm going to position those narratives as inextricably intertwined with a larger narrative that constructs America and American-ness. After all, it is because of how America, the ideological state and collective national culture, came into being that there is an "American" scholarly experience and a specific scholarly discourse about Native Americans at all.

The stories that write this larger narrative of America and American-ness are familiar ones -- "Christopher Columbus and the discovery," "the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving," "Pioneers and Manifest Destiny. Familiarity is precisely the point here in relation to Indian peoples Jimmie Durham, Cherokee poet/artist and AIM activist, claims that "America's narrative about itself centers upon a hidden text concerning its relationship with American Indians." Further, Durham sees the United States as "the first settler colony to establish itself against and through denial of its original inhabits" (425). It is this denial, this un-seeing, that characterizes America's master narrative

An essential part of this familiar narrative is told through the settlers vision of the frontier, a frontier that is "wilderness," empty of all "civilized" life. The settler is a brave individual who sets forth to pit **his** (and I use the male pronoun here deliberately) skills of "civilization" against this vast wilderness; **he** tames the wilderness, domesticates it and installs in it the icons of civilization -- Euroamerican town life, commerce, roads, railroads, churchs, stores and schools. The un-seeing of Indian peoples, nations, civilizations is obvious here. What is not so obvious is the correspondence of this image, this myth, to the stories that construct the Academy. But it is this same un-seeing of material bodies that translates into an academic re-creation of mythic bodies that are then configured as Native Americans.

The academic rules of scholarly discourse, our legitimizing discourse, require us to write ourselves into this frontier story, to repeat and reinscribe it. Scholars are to set forth on the fringes of "the known" in order to stake out and define a piece of scholarly territory which, through our skill at explicating and analyzing, will become our own scholarly domain, our area of concentration. We are meticulously trained to identify our object of study in terms of its difference from other objects of study, then to do everything within our power to bring that object into the realm of other "known" objects. In effect, we "civilize" unruly topics.

I don't mean to disable scholarly work here, on the contrary I don't believe that scholarly work, particularly that focused on Indians, can be fully enabled until we see the entire web of narratives in which it exists and works to create meaning. We cannot separate American scholarship from the narrative of America, but we can, by consciously and explicitly positioning our work within that narrative, begin to open space for the existing counter-stories that have been silenced by it.

So, where does the Indian, the Native American, enter these narratives? According to anthropologist James Clifton, what we think about Indians forms "a large part of generic North American culture." We use this knowledge

"automatically and credulously to organize behavior and to explain the behavior of others" (1). Clifford differentiates between what we "know" about Indians and what he calls "thinking clearly and critically about Indians" -- Clifford sees these as separate **kinds** of knowledge, the former a sort of uncritical culturally-based knowledge (9), the latter requiring "special intellectual discipline" (1). Clifton asserts that the "Indian" was "an invention of people of European origins," based on the assumption that "people so called shared common characteristics" (22).

If the "Indian" is a European, or Euroamerican, invention, then what purpose does it serve, how does it function in the American narrative? Modoc writer Michael Dorris claims that "the Indian mystique was designed for mass consumption by a European audience, the fulfillment of old and deep-seated expectations for 'the Other'" (99). The Native American is a construction, an integral part of the American master narrative that first claimed there "were no Indians in this country, only wilderness," then claimed that the Indians needed to be "civilized," then claimed that all the Indians had died and proclaimed those deaths a tragedy, and now claims that contemporary Indian peoples are "happy with their situation" and are, "in any event, no longer 'real' Indians" (Durham 428).

The strangest part of this narrative is the absolute necessity that this collective vision of the Native American not be disturbed by the material existence of contemporary Indians. Vine Deloria, Jr., a noted Indian scholar and historian, observes

> 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 "corrected" by the citation of some non-Indian and totally inaccurate "expert." (qtd. in Rose *Pretenders* 404)

This need to un-see Indians is complicated by the way in which the federal government sees Indians, in how it chooses to define who is -- and of course who isn't -- an Indian.

The legitimizing narrative most often used is that of blood quantum, which requires that "Indians" be able to trace their lineage to an **original** tribal roll number (Chaudhuri 21), but this is problematic since many tribal rolls were frozen during the 1890s Allotment Era. One has only to consider the material status of Indians in the past 100 years to envision the problem of laying a paper trail of birth certificates that is ultimately attached to a single name on a tribal roll. This narrative desire for proof of a single, locatable origin and its demand for blood-mapping immediately quantifies Indian peoples, and because of the federal emphasis on blood quantum, most Indians know themselves in terms of a fraction -- quarter-blood, half-blood, full-blood -- that represents their "worth" in the master narrative.

On Madison Avenue, the recognition factor of "the Indian" "outranks, on a world scale, that of Santa Claus, Mickey Mouse, and Coca Cola combined" (Dorris 99). It is the very centrality of this image that complicates any scholarly work that concentrates on Indian peoples. We are all, Indian and non-Indian alike, inscribed -- written -- by this master narrative. Scholars who concentrate on the study of Indian culture, history and literature often, in their attempt to disrupt this master narrative, create a kind of sympathetic echo behind it, a sort of popular scholarly narrative about Indians that is inextricably bound up in the same "unseeing" of the material and re-creation of the imaginary that goes on in the American master narrative. This story is characterized by outrage and concern about the lack of Indian voices, and its resolution is a collective effort to *re-create* those voices without listening to them first. This is precisely the danger that I want to point out. When we, as scholars, convince ourselves that we are no longer influenced by that American narrative of Indian-ness, in our denial of the very narrative that our

studies have shown us is insidious and pervasive in the culture in which we live, we are at risk of simply re-inventing that same narrative in a different key, a different tone, an echo that we convince ourselves is somehow exempt from colonial complicities by our intent to make it so.

If we assume that our position within the Academy will somehow protect us from the "smarminess" of American cultural imperialism, if we are reluctant to interrogate the narratives that we construct, then Indian cultures may be appropriated, distorted and owned by the American narrative in new and approved "scholarly" terms. As literary critic Arnold Krupat points out, in American we don't control "the production of counterstories, but their distribution" (11). So what rhetoricians, particularly Indian rhetoricians, **could** do in the Academy is find ways to distribute the counter-stories that already exist as well as ways to open space for new ones. It is this kind of "distribution" that might be useful to subverting the larger American master narrative, a distribution that would serve to inject heteroglossia and dialogue within a now-oppressive Academic monologue. But this story of opportunity is no less problematic than any other story in this talk, than any other story that involves Indian people. It too is complicated by the American master narrative, and it is further complicated by the Academic master narrative.

Hopi poet and anthropologist Wendy Rose writes:

> Always and everywhere, the inclusion of non-European intellectual content in the academy is absolutely predicated upon its conformity to sets of "standards" conceived and administered by those adhering to the basic precepts of Euro-derivation (*Pretenders* 407)

The American and Academic narratives collide in the embodiment of material Indian-ness presented by the Indian scholar. With both narratives at work in such a location, the opportunities presented by this border position can begin to

look like a prison. The stories available for Indian scholars begin to be limited at the initiate-scholar level. As Rose points out:

> The basic "qualification" demanded by academe of those who would teach non-European content [and for those of non-European origin] is that they first receive "advanced training" and "socialization" in doctoral programs steeped in the supposed universality of Euro-derivation. (*Pretenders* 407)

Tribal knowledge is eschewed for initiate-scholars who must "prove" themselves on a frontier already "settled" and "civilized.". Our story is written in two hands here -- the left, which expects us to "speak for our people," and the right, which expects us to do so in a voice that is not our own.

The Indian counter-story to that American narrative of sameness is that Indian people didn't have much in common until the Europeans arrived -- we had (and still have) different cultures, different languages, different names for ourselves; our only commonality was that we shared a relationship to this continent as a land base. Now, of course, culturally diverse groups of Indian peoples share what Ines Hernandez calls "the historical experience of colonization" and the simultaneous resistance to that colonial presence (9-10). The Indian counter-story to Academic "truth" is that different stories make different "truths," and that individuals from diverse tribal cultures don't always even tell the same stories. There is no one "real" Indian experience.

The Academic narrative is "culture-bound" by its own approach to knowledge. As Dorris points out the "conviction that the West holds a virtual monopoly on 'science,' logic, and clear-thinking" writes a singular narrative for the Indian scholar whose work is about some aspect of Indian culture (102). The Academic valuing of Western "objectivity" is used to narratively mark (usually with asterisks and italics) *the Indian who studies her own culture*. Dorris comments that

> American Indians who deal as scholars with Indian materials are assumed by some non-natives to be hopelessly subjective and biased, and much of their work is dismissed as self-serving. . . . Euro-americans have not felt shy in writing about their respective ancestors and are not automatically accused of aggrandizing them; why should native scholars be less capable of relatively impartial retrospection? (104)

It would seem that an Indian scholar is in an impossible bind -- limited by the master narratives constructing her, the stories she can tell *that will be heard* are limited. But, there are some stories that can be told, stories that open space for counter-stories and resistance, mixed blood stories told from the borders of Indian-ness, American-ness, Scholarly-ness. In fact, mixed blood stories are particularly powerful since the concept of identification by blood is authorized by the governmental narrative that marks and defines Indian peoples. And the Academic narrative often welcomes mixed blood scholars because they are exotic **but** aren't perceived as a real threat since they aren't "real" Indians. So here is a place, here is a story, that operates across narratives, across institutions and ideologies constructed by narratives, across frontiers/borders/boundaries. And here is the space for the "theorhetoric" from my title -- a mixed blood rhetoric that works through theories of history, anthropology and literature in order to assemble a border-situated web of tactics with which we can access various constructions of American Indian rhetorics.

Despite the narrative structures that we are written and constrained by, the need for opening space for counter-stories and enacting a theorhetorical perspective is great. Chippewa writer and theorist Gerald Vizenor would have us play trickster in those narratives, to use our knowledge of the language and structure which compose the narratives that bind us as instruments to cut away those same oppressive stories, to reveal the counter-stories that have simply been silenced by those loud insistent narrative voices of America and the Academy.

I want to finish my thinking aloud today with wisps of counter-stories from three American Indian poets. Joseph Bruchac, Linda Hogan and Wendy Rose. Bruchac writes "If you are ready to listen, you'll meet someone who is ready to talk" (245); Hogan replies "Blessed /are those who listen /when no one is left to speak" (qtd. in Lincoln 201); and Rose rejoins "Do you remember /when you twisted the wax from your ears /and shouted to me, 'You finally speak!' /because now you /could finally hear?" (*Going* 53) As rhetoric scholars, it is time we learned to open space for silence, so that the counter-stories of American Indians and the counter-stories of other unheard voices can gain volume, gain place, gain ----- alongside -- and even above -- that narrative echo of American-ness that implicates us all. It is time to use mixed-blood tactics and post-philosophical Sophistic pedagogies to enact a theorhetoric of listening or we might as well not pretend to listen at all.

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