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Soc/Anthro 242
St. Olaf College
Paper 3 of 7¹

A Series of Reflections –

These reflections were written during the spring semester of 2011, Contemporary Native American Issues course at St. Olaf College, in reaction to the materials and discussions of the course.

In the last assigned section of Reginald Horsman's Race and Manifest Destiny, I began to see the culmination of all of the ideologies described in the past chapters as they took form in the concept of manifest destiny. Even though tracking the development of these ideologies helped to elucidate, in some way, the atmosphere that provided impetus for westward expansion, and the proliferation of racialism, it nevertheless fails to explain to me how such ideology could so wholly eschew true understanding. That is to say, even when provided with a lengthy roadmap of these ideologies, it remains difficult for me to grasp how they could overcome on the ground human interactions. I can only comprehend this situation from my experiences: when I disagree with someone, when I come from a different background or culture from someone, or when I have different goals from someone, it at no point becomes impossible for me to recognize that person as a part of humanity, and a part of existence. And so, I suppose, I fail to see how such ideologies, however prevalent and however powerful, could fully obscure that basic reality. I understand that I come from a different "time", and I know that not every American and not every Anglo-American adhered to these ideologies; still, the popular culture of an age should, in my opinion, never be given reign to dictate who is more human than another. That is not a quantifiable measure, if ever there was one. More than that, I do not think that we should dictate what is of more worth -- as if all things could be placed on a scale of good and bad, superior and

¹ Papers 1 and 2 are not included, as they are text based.

inferior, and thusly and irreversibly categorized. If I have learned one lesson, it is the illusion of good and evil. Things are, and that is all the more judgment that I feel I should ever need make. It may be tempting to look to history and say, “those were bad people; those were misguided people”, yet I think that is a fruitless accusation. Why do I think this? Most likely it is because I do not see humans as superior to any organism; we are all made of the same matter; we all contain, at essence, the same building blocks. But also, I think that to isolate any one person or culture as “bad” is to neglect the very basic fact that we are all connected.

At the same time, I do firmly believe that we should actively work towards mending the relationships that have been distorted by oppressive ideologies. I do not believe we should ever shy away from speaking against what we find, at our core, to be wrong. At least as dictated by the realm of human interaction, I do believe that there can exist a right and a wrong -- or at the very least, there exists always a perception of that which we would not like done unto ourselves, and this we may say is the basis for human interaction. Therefore, at my core, I cannot see how any “American”, settler, or human being could justify themselves in the theft of inhabited land. I cannot see how any “American” would not be able to recognize, and react, to what they in any other instance identified as “wrong.” I do not see how an “American” could say to a thief, without hesitation, “that is not yours, you cannot take it” and yet all the same say to Indian tribes and individuals “that is yours, but it will be mine.” Even with the rampant racialism that Horsman describes of the 19th century, I still see it as no justification. As I have stated in my previous reflection papers, I find racialism to be the most outward expression of insecurity; racist attitudes and connotations of “superiority” exist today, but it is my opinion that they stem from a fear of self-assessment. Adherents to the imperial legacy – in the past and today -- prefer, rather than acknowledge traits that they dislike within themselves, to instead project them onto others

and so enhance themselves. To do so is to miss the opportunity to know oneself, and to know those around you.

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Williams' work, *Like a Loaded Weapon*, introduced me to a part of Native American history -- and present day issue -- that I was previously only peripherally aware of. I knew, clearly, that there is an immense amount of legal work to be done in order to achieve even marginal justice for tribes. However, I was unaware of the extent to which present day courts drew their decisions from 19th century examples, as well as pre-19th century ideas of race and equality. It seems to me that the only way the racial opinions guiding unfair legal ruling can persist into the present day is that judges, -- and to a degree the 'American' people, who are of course complicit in the perpetuation of these racial opinions -- whether "unconsciously" or consciously, remain *unwilling* to make changes. Ingrained ideas of "race", as Williams points out, can certainly guide a person's actions. Nevertheless, I still cannot understand the extent to which these same people, judges included, are not able at least in some small measure to recognize the consequences of their actions for Native peoples. This alone should trigger some "consciousness" of their adoption of stereotypical, unequal treatment of Native legal issues. More importantly, judges, who have such responsibility and 'jurispathic' power, should be doubly sensitive to their biases and the sources of their opinions.

However, I wonder at the same time if the usage of these racial attitudes is not, in fact, recognized and subsequently ignored. As I have said in class, the United States government rarely makes changes unless it is in some degree perceived as beneficial to the United States. While there were, of course, some non-minority Americans who participated ardently in civil rights movements, I do think that they were ultimately achieved -- in some part -- due to the United States realization that the continuance of

civil, officially allowed, inequality was costly to the United States. None of which is to say that movements initiated by marginalized groups themselves do not play an incredible role in achieving their goals -- civil rights activists worked, and continue to work, persistently towards the pursuit of equality; I do not mean to belittle their sacrifices. However, as long as the United States fails to see how truly beneficial it *would* be to recognize tribal sovereignty, relinquish stereotypes and racisms, and return lands, it will take a great amount of struggle to achieve the equality and sovereignty that tribes seek. In my opinion, the United States cannot act internationally or even internally and claim to espouse the virtues of 'equality' until it recognizes the extreme hurts it has caused to Native people, *and* takes initiative to repair those hurts through recognizing tribes as sovereign, and through offering all means of assistance in working with tribes to repair what has been taken. Unfortunately, the United States is reliably inept at looking beyond the present; it cannot see beyond the loss of power, the 'insecurity', and the very literal loss of land that would, allegedly, result from recognizing true tribal sovereignty. I say allegedly because I do not believe that it would be a 'loss', in any way, for the United States to address its own injustices. Moreover, even if it were a 'loss', it is one that must be undertaken. While I do agree with Williams, that this 'insecurity', and unwillingness of the United States does stem in part from the persistence of images of Native peoples as "savages", I think that at the heart of the matter it is greed, and deliberate ignorance on the part of the United States towards Native peoples that has obscured the more obvious issues of justice, compassion, and respect.

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Myself, and many of my classmates, struggled to determine whether Bagone-giizhig the Younger (and to some extent, the Elder's) actions stemmed from "selfishness" or "selflessness." While I think that this is a question Bagone-giizhig's contemporaries also struggled with, I found myself wondering what made us believe that we should have any authority to judge his actions in such stark, simplistic terms. At the conclusion of the Assassination of Hole-in-the-Day, Treuer explains the situation for Ojibwe people after Bagone-giizhig's assassination; the loss of influence that the Ojibwe suffered in the eyes of the state of Minnesota and the U.S. government indicates that, no matter what motivated a given action of Bagone-giizhig, he had achieved something for his people; after his assassination, Minnesota ceased to regard the Ojibwe as a sovereign nation, and that fact is closely tied to the loss of Bagone-giizhig. My point is that, focusing on whether Bagone-giizhig was wholly selfless or wholly selfish neglects one of the most important facets of his life, which was his effect on his people. It seems clear from Treuer's epilogue that his effect was a beneficial one, since without his tenacity, the Ojibwe people were not able to maintain the same level of influence in the face of increasing U.S. and Minnesotan demands and encroachment. For example, when Bagone-giizhig was not only able to use his authority to stop timber harvesting by white settlers but also to receive recompense and force the state to *negotiate* his terms, he was able to force the state to recognize him -- and by extension, the Ojibwe people -- as sovereign and as a power that could not be ignored. Perhaps his influence could have prevented the consumption of Ojibwe land by the United States.

It is because of these examples that I cannot help but wonder if the late 1800s would not have turned

out differently if Bagone-giizhig had not been assassinated. I feel that such a question is asked in any instance where a leader is lost prematurely: it is asked with Martin Luther King Jr., with JFK, with Tecumseh, and with many other figures. What is interesting to me is that Bagone-giizhig does not appear to have been considered a martyr because of his assassination. I do not know why this is. Even though his death was not “martyrdom” by definition, plenty of figures have been adopted as “martyrs” despite the actual circumstances of the deaths. Neither do I know what impact this might have had on the Ojibwe at this time. Personally, although I found Treuer’s work to be extensive, I would be interested to see other sources on Bagone-giizhig the Younger and to know how others perceive him.

I also wonder what a different place Minnesota might be simply if this history were a part of the public education curriculum. How different our understandings of the state might be! And how better our ability to coexist and work towards healing! While reading the article concerning Foucault, I was struck especially by his belief that there *is no truth*, but only relative truths -- that is, there are only truths within a given discourse. By extension, Foucault means that it is, therefore, not possible to seek truths --at least universal truths -- because they are only relative. Even though this may be the case, I cannot be dissuaded in believing that the histories of Indian peoples *must* be told honestly. I sometimes think that I will never understand the persistence of the United States in stealing Indian land and oppressing Indian cultures. I cannot understand how the driving forces of the United States fail so consistently to see beyond the immediacy of the present, and are unable to consider the consequences of its actions beyond the benefits it garners for itself. Is it greed? I would like to say yes, but I know that this, too, is a simplistic answer. All of our reading on theory, such as Horseman’s Race and Manifest Destiny, still has not resolved this question for me. Is it fear? And if it is fear that has been the impetus for the cultural oppression persecuted against Indian peoples, why? What is there to fear in something

different from oneself? I have been raised by contradictory teachings: that difference should be embraced (in theory) but that it is dangerous (in practice). However, through observation of the world around me, I see very clearly that difference on one level is an invented idea -- we are essentially no different from the rocks, the soil, or other growing things. On another level, I see that uniqueness often enables coexistence. The plants that live together compete against each other; at the same time, they help each other by having different specialties. I feel that this lesson is more meaningful than the contradictory teachings I have experienced from my education.

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To read some of Deloria's work was, for me, an extremely refreshing experience. As someone educated within the framework of "Western" ways of thinking, I sometimes feel restricted in understanding the world around me. By this, I mean that it has always been very clear to me that I am not separate from the land that exists around me, or from other objects in that world (be they rocks, plants, other animals, etc.). Even so, my own education seems to struggle with reconciling this connectedness and instructing me that as humans, we are somehow outside of the physical world. Recently, I was struck by Deloria's statement that "[religion] is a force in and of itself and it calls for the integration of lands and peoples in harmonious unity. The lands wait for those who can discern their rhythms." Personally, I am not "religious." In fact, for a few years I have rejected the concept of religion. To hear Deloria speak about the inseparability of "science," "philosophy," "religion," etc. from one another spoke, for me, to this rejection; it helped me to better realize that perhaps I do not reject religion because of what it is, at its essence, but only because it has been presented to me as something separate from my other modes of perceiving and experiencing the world. The concept of separate spheres of "knowing" is so engrained in Western education that these separateness is perpetuated for each generation. The one encouragement is that perhaps some of the curiosity that guides "science" may help to lead the Western education process towards accepting the Indigenous ways of interacting with the world. Because of this, at times, reading Deloria's arguments gave me a feeling of relief. I do not know why, except that perhaps there is some comfort in knowing that there are others who have struggled with the alienation of Western ways of thinking from the world that we all inhabit. In research for a history paper, I recently came across a

statement by a Tungus shaman (in Siberia) concerning his way of perceiving time and space: “my soul has a hundred arms, and those arms are so long that when extended they reach to all points of the universe.” This way of thinking one’s arms extend to all points of the universe, because at essence we are all connected in a very literal way by the matter and energy of which we are made struck me as especially relevant with respect to some of Deloria’s statements.

There was one idea proposed by Deloria, nevertheless, that I am not sure if I understand correctly; when Deloria says that “most likely religions do not in fact cross national and ethnic lines without losing their power and identity,” I do not mean to say that I was unable to comprehend his argumentation; rather, I feel that there are many people who come from “outside” of certain “ethnic” or “national” lines, who find complete comfort and acceptance in a “religion” that is not endemic to their biological place of origin. I agree with Deloria that a cultural way of thinking is based on a given culture’s relationship to the land, but I do not think that it is impossible for someone from elsewhere to learn to hear the rhythms of that land, through observation, respect, and experience. It is only unfortunate that so few people attempt to listen to these rhythms.