

Facing the Fire

American Indian Literature and the Pedagogy of Anger

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JANUARY 2001

Class ends; I talk with a small group of students. In this one seminar, the group after class consists mainly of Navajo students. I return to my office, close the door; I'm done for the day. Knock, knock. It is one of the seminar's white students, looking a little pained: "I'm always worried I'm going to say the wrong thing. She's so angry and I know she judges me, us. What am I supposed to do? I'm just trying to learn, but I don't want to be attacked, it makes me feel uncomfortable."

FEBRUARY 2001

"Most people think that Truck Schultz is racist, but I agree with many of his ideas." This comment on a listserv discussion prompts a furious reply from a Native student, a rhetorically sophisticated reply, that alludes to the rage that perhaps gives rise to the "Indian Killer" in Sherman Alexie's novel of the same name. The student implies that the author of the posting better watch out, since he would show her and anyone else just how "savage" he could be. Some students try to mediate the dispute, others stop participating, others notify me; one notifies the campus police.

MARCH 2001

"This is the kind of racist crap from my classmates and most of my teachers that I'm no longer going to put up with! You all (pointing at a row of non-Native students) don't know what it's like to go to school here. I

took last semester off and could barely function: it was all I could do to take care of my kids; I didn't want to leave the house. I'm in this class because I know this professor isn't going to put me in jeopardy."

APRIL 2001

"Esther Belin's 'Ruby's Answer' [1999] is so angry. It made me feel bad when she read it at the reading last night."

JUNE 2001

Comment made during the first hour of the first day of a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Institute for High School Teachers on the teaching of American Indian Literature. I am the lead faculty member and the high school teachers, from all over the nation, selected this five-week institute because of their personal interest. A middle-aged white woman: "Why are these Native American writers so angry? I find them so disturbing. How do they expect to build bridges with this sort of attitude?"

JUNE 2001

Second hour of the first day of the NEH Summer Institute. An American Indian woman, after scanning the packet of secondary articles, all authored by Native scholars and public intellectuals: "None of these writers seem Indian to me. Look how they write. This is not how Indian people talk."

JULY 2001

Three weeks into the NEH Summer Institute:

"There's not room in my high school's curriculum for Native American history and literature."

—a white male political science teacher

"What do you mean, there's not room? Listen to yourself! I'm sick of this attitude!"

—a history teacher who is American Indian

JULY 2001

Three weeks and two more days into the NEH Summer Institute. After a heated discussion, primarily among the seminar participants of color, about refusing to romanticize the past, a white seminar participant says, “Why can’t we all just try to get along today? We have more in common with each other than we have differences.” Silence. An African American woman responds, finally, “You just don’t get it.” She slams her folder on her desk to emphasize her point and rushes out of the seminar. Awkward silence.

SEPTEMBER 2001

Introductory College Honors course—beginning a unit on Native writers. Of the 39 students, 32 of whom are white, only 3 have read anything (even a poem) by a writer of Native descent. I’m the angry one in this instance, angry at the education system that has produced them.

OCTOBER 2001

Overheard conversation just before class:

“Sherman Alexie is just too angry. He offended everything I stand for.”

—white student after listening to author on campus.

“Oh really? He defended everything I stand for.”

—student of African and Mexican descent.

OCTOBER 2001

A Native student in a seminar composed of 17 Native students and 1 white student: “Your white students think *Indian Killer* is angry? I think it’s hilarious!”

NOVEMBER 2001

Evaluation of NEH Summer Institute: “The one thing that could be improved was Berglund’s classroom management style: he let one woman stand on her soapbox pontificating the whole time about her politics. Instead of letting her rage on, Berglund should have controlled how often she spoke to get the perspective of the other members of the seminar.”

I know that regular readers of *American Indian Quarterly* have all too often heard and/or experienced anecdotes such as the ones mentioned above. I share them not to rehearse the obvious, to evoke empathy, or to invoke antipathy (*what an idiot he must be*), but to point out a common enough trend that is all but ignored in pedagogical discussions within Native studies. As a non-Native scholar I want to share my understanding of what I see Native students regularly facing in the university (not just my institution, but most), and what they may come to face even within the confines of Native studies courses. When I have told my Native students or colleagues about the focus of this brief essay, I have been regaled with stories of when they were called angry or told not to be so angry. (In fact, as I spell check this essay for a final time, my e-mail alert brings in another, unsolicited story of anger in the university—another institution, but similar concerns.) Too often Native students are faced with two options, neither of which are satisfactory: (1) shut up and put up, or (2) be viewed as angry and militant, a prickly rabble-rouser. In this brief space I want to share my growing understanding of the pedagogical usefulness of addressing and capitalizing upon the energy of anger or so-called anger in the classroom, in particular the literature classroom where the focus is on books by American Indian writers.

I disagree with the above comments made by an NEH Summer Institute participant that American Indian writers are angrier than other writers. I disagree that Native students are ready to be angry. I think comments such as those made above are prompted by vestiges of centuries-old stereotypes about so-called savagery and barbarism. I think the label “angry” is too often a deflection of what is really uncomfortable: the truth. Labeling an Indian person, writer, student, or activist as angry casts them as unreasonable, as emotionally unruly, as illegitimate. American Indian writing is political, no doubt. How could it not be? But this is not to say writers are angry, that readers and fans of such writers are angry, easy to dismiss.

Before continuing, I want to pause to consider the nature of anger. Since our understanding of anger and its place and role in public discourse is quite personal and varied, make adjustments to the following large generalizations: We know it (anger) when we feel it, but bristle when others label it for us. When others label it, there is a sense that we are judged to be out of control, that we are inappropriate, that our reactions are excessive, that we are being irrational or overly emotional. We are told, “Don’t lose your temper!” Moreover, we are uncomfortable when

what we are saying or thinking is labeled as angry when it emerges from an intellectual and critical (not solely emotional) space.

As a teacher of literature, I am not precisely sure what elicits a so-called angry response to discussions surrounding Native literature. But consider these speculations as to why many non-Native students might respond with anger toward and distrust of Native writers: Is it because of literary retribution on the part of authors? Is it a reaction to literary table turning? Is it the all too real, historical accuracy of Native accounts? Is it a symptom of unrevealed and unarticulated guilt on the part of readers? Is it posturing by the reader to avoid the deeper implications of these texts? Does it function to produce “anger” so that the interpretations and definitions of authors and “angry Native people” become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Dominant culture presumes that life in America is grand. Native narratives disrupt these “comfortable” illusions. Native students who are quiet—who choose to protect themselves in public—sustain such illusions, but who can blame them? Native students who speak out, at great personal risk, are automatically seen as “angry.” While my goal in the classroom is ultimately to show that such responses are not related to anger but to accuracy and to a rightful sense of justice, my initial goal is to provide a space to listen to that which is not usually sanctioned, to instill in others an urgent need to similarly bear witness.

When the concerned white student knocked on my door, worried about offending an “angry” Native student, my instinct was to probe my student’s presumptions directly. This is easier to do on a one-on-one basis but something I recognize as necessary within the larger class as well. With the white student, who assumed I was her ethnic ally, we worked through the notion of white privilege and how she can most likely move through every day inside and outside the classroom without the risk of racial sabotage. I asked her to think about where the Native student—who she labeled as ready to “lash out”—might be coming from, how her reactions are personal but also couched in lived experience, cultural knowledge, and public history. But this was a starting point and neither a solution or complex response. I suggested that she not automatically assume that she was a target of criticism or that a critique of white people was automatically a unilateral critique of her as well. While this is a complicated and potentially dishonest tactic, it pulls the student out of his/her personal emotional involvement and requires the student to examine the issue from a broader historical, economic, and political climate.

This white student clearly wanted to do the right thing, but she wanted to avoid conflict altogether. But how could she? How could we? I shared with her what I now label a pedagogical strategy: that conflict will not be avoided; in fact, avoiding conflict *feeds conflict* because it is merely an avoidance of honesty and truthfulness. Allowing expression of angry feelings may seem uncomfortable. Avoidance of conflict will not actually eliminate discomfort, at least not for Native students—it will simply displace it and deepen it. This kind of avoidance may drive some into deep depression, despair, and suicide. The gut-wrenching despair detailed by one of my Native students in the opening of the essay certainly testifies to this reality: so-called civility in the classroom masks true savagery if we fail to recognize our nation's bloody history and our nation's persistent colonial state for what it is.

The climate in this class definitely improved, but it continued to be exploratory—that is, there was never a defined comfort zone. Perhaps the most productive experience in that semester's course was an open dialogue between two of the Native students whose political persuasions could not have been more different; although both were Navajo, they had different perspectives on almost every issue related to Native American politics. This caused each individual personal angst—because of possible assumptions other non-Navajo students would have about Navajo people—yet the lively discussions shaped our class's discourse in amazing ways, reminding us that it is impossible and naïve to see Native or tribal identity in monolithic terms. So-called anger could not be tidily dismissed as irrationality linked to personal identity.

That same semester controversy erupted in my other course over a listserv debate about one student's alignment with Truck Schultz, a Rush Limbaugh-type character from Sherman Alexie's thriller, *Indian Killer* (1996), set in contemporary Seattle. One student said that she agreed with what Schultz stated in a chapter called "Fire Starter." In some respects, the novel's representation of campus politics came to life before my very eyes. This student referred to Schultz's commentary that fanned the flames of subsequent racially motivated hate crimes in the novel:

I mean, what happens to a child that is given everything he wants? That child becomes an aggressive, domineering brat. Well, citizens, we keep giving Indians everything they want. We give them fishing rights, hunting lands. We allow them to have these illegal casinos on

their land. They have rights that normal Americans do not enjoy. Indians have become super citizens, enjoying all the advantages of being Americans while reveling in the special privileges they received just for being Indians. And we give them all of this because we supposedly stole their land from them. (Alexie 1996, 208)

This diatribe continues ad nauseam, covering typical misnomers about Native people, running roughshod over the truth. Most readers recognize that Alexie is satirizing and then condemning this character's views. One of the few Native students in this class, for very clear reasons, took issue with this student's discussion post and, more generally, to the class's seemingly neutral response to the events focused on in Alexie's novel. He wrote that he had not been given a thing, that he has had to work twice as hard and through a lot of "bullshit": "Like people thinking that my people have been given everything." He took issue with the implication put forward by Truck Schultz and the other student's post that "Indians should have been assimilated." And he closed his post by making a plea for personal, human recognition: "And if you do have a problem, I would appreciate it if you talked to me, since I am an Indian, savage, heathen, whatever you want to call it, and I will show you how savage I can be. Thank you. And have fear the rest of the day." Students replied, some trying to defend the student who originated the discussion thread. Others tried to broker peace, others tried to brush over the conflict. One student e-mailed me directly. One phoned me but only after he called the campus police, genuinely concerned for the safety of his classmate.

Following the advice of the police—who followed up with me—and my department chair, I temporarily disbanded the listserv, met individually with all students involved, spoke to each about the need for respect and security in the classroom, and made it clear to all involved that I saw a rhetorically sophisticated and energized response inspired by the novel's tone rather than a real threat of harm. I told them about my decision to disband the listserv primarily because the all-electronic forum had erased our humanity. I made them promise to attend the subsequent class period, and we talked through the issues, noting how the facelessness of the virtual world enabled the student to make what I thought was a racist comment, a comment that would have been harder to make in the face-to-face environment of the classroom. (Of course, privately, I thought, *is this what was needed to expose the incivility of civility?*) I steered the class's

focus to the comment that initiated the controversy rather than the response that some saw as angry and a not-so-veiled threat of violence. I explained what the student initiated as a so-called literary response was taken to be—and why not, considering how few Native students there were?—a personal attack, a racist threat.

Facing each other and the angry emotions from the previous day, the class—particularly the individuals involved—had time to come at the discussion with a fresh perspective. Through discussion it was clear that the student's primary point, not fleshed out in the initiating post, was about the continuing existence of reservations, which led us back into history to discuss the Dawes Allotment Act and its effects on different tribal histories. Confronting the anger expressed on the listserv allowed the class to come to a clearer understanding of issues and helped non-Native students in particular to understand how, for students of color, comments about communal or group history are perceived as personal comments because students of color, outnumbered as they are at our university, bear the pressure of representing an entire group of people. In retrospect, I see that my greatest insights are quite simple, but from the sound of what my Native students tell me, not so common in practice: (1) do not shy from conflict and (2) always clear space to directly address such conflict, finding solutions somehow related to the material itself, in my case the sociopolitical backdrop of a novel.

Despite my outward confidence that expressions of anger were a good thing, that such feelings led us to deeper, more honest discoveries, most of the time during 2001 I was quite uncomfortable and uneasy about my pedagogical strategies. Without going into too much detail about the remainder of my year, suffice it to say I often found myself reflecting on possible strategies to minimize conflict. I even attended a colloquia on “mediating conflict” in the classroom, but there the emphasis was on diffusing anger produced by antisocial personalities. I was pretty sure that this was not a problem in my classes, although there is a good joke in there somewhere—I have heard a few from my Native students. Most of the time I wondered if I should have chosen different texts in order to minimize clashes, or if I was asking the wrong questions, or if I should have scripted (that is, controlled) the courses a bit more. Usually, I mused, a bit sophomorically, *How can I make everyone happy?*

But when I sincerely evaluated my practices, I found that my worst crime was the privileging of an Indigenous perspective, a perspective that

I saw as pedagogically sound and critically and intellectually astute. Given the number of non-Native students in my courses, it was quite likely that a clash in value systems would occur. I concluded that I could not erase feelings of anger, but I could rename them, bracket them off, suspend them in limbo. I could come back to the basics and remind myself that anger comes from a clash in perspectives and further remind myself of another basic principle—that the only antidote to so-called anger is truth, not a univocal truth where there is one easy reality, but a truth that is based on a range of debates, an array of tribal knowledges and foundational concerns of Native communities and Native academic communities. Following the lead of Native literary scholars such as Robert Warrior (1995), Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (2001, 1996), Craig Womack (1998), and Maori social scientist Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), as well as the even more recent thinking of literary critics Daniel Heath Justice (2001) and Kimberly Roppolo (2001), I have become even more determined that tribally centered reading practices and explicit and documented histories serve as the antidote to anger, or if not the antidote, the way out of the knotty dilemma presented by deep-running emotions.

More than an impediment, the productive discussion of anger—its origins, its definitions, its alter egos (or real emotions)—in the literature classroom can help to advance a culturally specific reading practice, one that respects, in the case of Native literature, the values and the histories of specific tribal cultures. Approaching literature (and history) from a tribally conscious perspective may run the risk of further alienating non-Native students, but this approach makes it close to impossible to claim that Native responses and writings are fueled by simplistic, naïve emotions or personal quirkiness.

Such approaches, rather, reorient readers to examine the survival of rich cultural and literary artistic traditions and the enduring political and social structures of tribal cultures *within the context of* the troubling history of Native peoples vis-à-vis the state. If nothing else, this approach makes the study of Native literature a rigorous academic endeavor, the understanding of which is dependent upon an accurate knowledge of history and literary (that is, tribal aesthetic) traditions. By imploring students of all backgrounds to take such approaches, I am able to mitigate some of the naïve anger on the part of white students and hopefully begin to counteract the feelings of resentment or estrangement on the part of Native students, feelings that evolve out of their experiences in the

university, and society more generally, where Indigenous perspectives are either denigrated or ignored altogether.

I know my Native students need other scholars to think about anger and perceptions of it. We need to find ways to create an escape valve for palpable emotions—not to make the feelings disappear altogether but to ensure that Native students do not self destruct in isolation. I know that non-Native students need to rename anger lest they be reduced to it. If scholars and students identify anger, dissect it, and rename it, if positions are delineated, if histories are taught and tribal values respected, creative analyses will emerge, and students and scholars will produce fresh knowledge. When my class listserv discussion flared up, instead of running from anger, instead of soothing over pain, strong emotions required us to stop and to delve into history for more accurate understandings. The clash of knowledge and ignorance, of no-choice experience and cultural blindness, sparked flames on the listserv; but, in facing the fire, by lighting a historically accurate, personally meaningful backfire, we were able to salvage much remaining critical landscape, growing more able to stand ground against “the fire next time” (see Baldwin [1963] 1993). We have to light such backfires, for as Simon Ortiz writes,

Meanwhile. And soon.

The forests are burning, burning, burning, burning. I smell the smoke.
Like now. (1997, 141)

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