Racial Conflict and Radical Pedagogy in the Contact Zone

STEPHEN GILBERT BROWN

Land that will always own us, everywhere it is red. Linda Hogan

[S]ince the classroom discourse conflicts are local manifestations of social and political ones, teachers of basic writers need to carry this pedagogical work outside their classroom. Thomas Fox

The Land: This New Grey Placelessness

The words of Hogan and Fox comprise a useful point of departure for this discussion inasmuch as they establish the local—in this case, the land of the Athabascan Indian—as the locus of both identity and conflict. The contested terrain of the Alaskan indigene is both the source of a new, radical red subjectivity and of a series of environmental conflicts or eco-wars between whites and Athabascans, dominant and sub cultures, transnational corporations and tribal councils. Further, as the site of a renascent Native American identity, the Edenic home of the Alaskan indigene reinscribes one of the dominant tropes of Native American narratives: the emergence motif. In this instance, it is not the mythical emergence of a race but the emergence of a new, living, Native American identity that is imbricated in the land, and in the native’s effort to reconnect to it. Similarly, the ancestral topos of the Athabascan is the locus of environmental conflicts pitting the commercial enterprises of loggers, miners, and oil-drillers against the subsistence hunting and fishing activities of the native. In the last analysis, the land of the Athabascan was not only inseparable from the local conflicts and the recuperation of native subjectivity, it became as well the inspiration and locus for my own particular brand of emancipatory borderland pedagogy—a praxis which ignored most, broke many, adapted some, and honored a few of the old rules, while making up some new ones along the way—a pedagogy driven largely by the harsh conditions of the northern borderlands, which privileges above all else survival, utility, and freedom.

In an effort to make learning in general, and basic-writing instruction in particular, more meaningful to marginalized students, I similarly attempted to extend my pedagogy beyond the immediate confines of the school—which in this instance was a blue, cinderblock, K-12 edifice situated in the middle of an
Athabascan Indian Reservation in Alaska. Writing themes in this bicultural borderland were thus generated by an inquiry into the landscape, and particularly into a series of racially-charged environmental conflicts. Composition topics were also generated by an inquiry into a series of racially-driven conflicts associated with the school itself. In this paper I examine the complicity of the transnational corporation and the reservation school in the enterprise of cultural colonialism. Additionally, I explore the relevance of these local cultural conflicts for an emancipatory, conflict-oriented, pedagogy. Moreover, I "read" or "re-read" this experience through the prismatic lens of diverse theoretical discourses, including postcolonialism, radical composition theory, and Native American resistance struggle in an effort to identify congruencies between them and to expand the "conversation" in composition studies into other disciplines.

My first day as a white male English teacher in the Athabascan village of Nyotek consisted of a series of shocks. There was, for example, the shock of my first encounter with the Alaskan landscape, as monochromatic as it was limitless—perhaps an ideal milieu in which to proselytize the advantages of cultural sameness. An ear-ringing silence the likes of which I had never heard rolled in from every point of the compass. It was the habitual voice of the Alaskan North—reinscribing on a vast physical plane the cultural silencing of the Native American. As I stood beside my duffel bags at the end of a gravel runway deep in the Alaskan interior, a grimly ironic bit of Athabascan graffiti caught my eye. Spray-painted onto a lopsided, weather-beaten shed were the following words: "Welcome to the Nyotek Hilton! Reservation required!"

It was my first encounter with the playfully parodic, resistant discourse of the subaltern. The conscription of the name "Hilton" also served to underscore the extent to which the discourse of the colonizer is often subversively appropriated by subalterns as a vehicle for fashioning their own resistant identity, as further evinced by the intentional misspelling of "Reservation." This fragment of Athabascan doggerel provided my first glimpse of what Homi Bhabha terms the "sly civility" of the subaltern—of the way in which irony, parody, satire, back talk, allegory and other forms of resistant discourse are used by the colonized "other" to recuperate agency, to preserve a sense of "self" independent from his or her construction as "other" by the colonizer.

The native subaltern similarly uses the discourse of the colonizer to keep his or her ego from being completely colonized by that discourse. Like Hamlet, the native Other resorts to "sly civility" in order to effect the dual, oppositional goal of ensuring survival while subversively naming their colonized world—a rhetorical strategy which has important connotations for the composition classroom. Thus, the subaltern's rhetoric of "sly civility" is at once a cloak that conceals resistance and a dagger that enacts it. As Benita Parry observes, the toolshed doggerel was but one of many "recurrent instances of transgression performed by the native from within and against colonial discourse" (41). Further, it established from the outset the central role enacted by language in the unevenly and bitterly contested politics of identity as it was played out in this
bicultural borderland. In the classroom transgression of linguistic norms was likewise enacted in many ways by subaltern students through a heteroglossia of discourses foregrounding resistance, sly civility, irony, satire, and non-standard, biidiomatic syntax—as for example in the Athabascan’s favorite disclaimer uttered after a jest at one’s expense, “I jokes.”

The “contact zone” that comprised the setting of my first teaching job was not only a site where a dominant culture and an indigenous subculture came into violent contact with one another, but a topos where a unitary teacherly discourse and a heteroglossia of subaltern discourses violently collided. It was also an intellectual crossroads where the diverse discourses of postcolonialism, Native American resistance struggle, and radical composition theory might be brought into dialogic “contact” with one another; where the common goal of their emancipatory struggle might be actualized through the useful interplay of language and landscape; where agency might be recuperated and critical literacy achieved by using language in general and writing in particular to effect a ritualistic reconnection to the landscape, by allowing subalterns to name their conflicted World with the critical Word, and by using writing as ceremony to reforge the bonds to an ancestral topos from which the subaltern student has become alienated.

**Composition as a Decolonizing “Ceremony” of Reconnection**

Alienation is a disease the colonizer brings into the borderlands, one that spreads with the virulence of a small-pox epidemic through the ranks of indigenous peoples who seek to mimic the colonizer’s ways. The effort to assimilate into the dominant culture produces many adverse effects upon the native, one of which is an acute sense of alienation from an ancestral topos and an hereditary subculture, producing in the native a sense of “homelessness” that is bitterly ironic compared to the homelessness of the Saidian exile, inasmuch as the Native American’s homelessness is enacted within sight of his or her home, is effected while he or she is literally at home. In the politics of cultural imperialism, the native enjoys a distinct home-field disadvantage for they are truly strangers in their own land.

This is the central theme of several contemporary Native American narratives, including Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*, N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and James Welsh’s *The Death of Jim Loney*. The theme also recurs in more traditional, as-told-to autobiographies, such as *Black Elk Speaks* and *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*. The recurring theme in all these works is redemption from alienation through ritualistic reconnection to the native landscape, as Robert M. Nelson observes in *Place and Vision: The Function of Landscape in Native American Fiction*:

This view, manifest also in *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, is that alienation (like Loney’s, and like twentieth century humanity’s more generally) is a curable disease, and that what Loney needs, like Abel and Tayo both, is a “good ceremony”—involvement in a process of self-rediscvery that for its efficacy depends on reconstituting his individual consciousness to bring it into closer accord with the shape of the land and, thereby, with the life-force(s)immanent there. [99]
One of the fundamental questions driving this discussion is whether writing and reading instruction could function in a similarly ceremonial manner, as rituals of “self-rediscovery” and reconnection to a native landscape, and ultimately as an emancipatory antidote to the mutilations of alienation, exile, and deracination? Might not writing, if configured as ceremony, if grounded in the borderland narratives of other oppressed minorities and in the oppressive lived realities of these subaltern students, not only reinscribe the traditional Native American rituals of the “healing ceremony” and the vision quest, but facilitate the efforts of these basic writers to “say their own word,” to transform themselves from colonized “others” into decolonized “selves” (Freire 121)? Further, might not instruction in non-canonical borderland narratives not only offer useful rereadings of history, but reinvigorate the subaltern’s effort to reconnect to his or her own native landscape, to reterritorialize lost realms of the self through writing? By mitigating the mutilating effects of acculturation (alienation, contradiction, ambiguity, confusion, insecurity, and despair) and by fostering a sense of critical literacy, might not writing if deployed in this fashion help such borderland learners become, in the words of Min-Zhan Lu, “active residents of the borderlands” instead of passive objects confined not only to the margins of a dominant culture that discriminates against them, but to the fringes of their own homeland from which they have been dispossessed (900).

Writing grounded in the landscape and the lived realities of borderland learners is thus posited as a classroom counterpart to the “healing ceremony Loney needs to cure his disease,” to the traditional Native American vision quest, inseparably yoked to the process of individual empowerment, discovery, and identity—construction in the service of collective interests (Nelson 100). The native landscape and the conflicts inherent in it function as a “touchstone” that the alienated individual “can use to reestablish order in his life,” after the disordering dislocations of deracination (101). Thus, basic-writing instruction was not only yoked to readings of these borderland narratives, but configured around a systematic inquiry into a series of racially-driven environmental conflicts, in an effort to help the native student reconnect to his or her ancestral topos, to eradicate the effects of their bicultural alienation, and to facilitate the acquisition of academic as well as critical literacy.

The Interstate, the Infinite, and the Imperial

As for myself, I too was in need of some sort of “healing vision,” of reconnection to a particular place, as an antidote to the geographical, political and social alienation I suffered as a consequence of my voluntary exile from “home.” For the time being, I felt dwarfed beyond insignificance amid such a monolithic landscape. In a way it was the ideal setting for the monolithic enterprises of American colonialism. Its infinite inhospitable spaces defied comprehension. Ironically, it is in just such limitless spaces that the colonizing impulse finds the ideal conditions for its own reproduction. That which repels the comfort-loving interloper attracts the industrious imperialist. Thus, it is no coincidence that the
imperialist impulse is most rampantaly manifested in terrains that seemingly have no bounds, whose expanses offer few constraints to the expansive enterprises of the colonizer.

Alaska is such a place. If there is one thing the Far North has plenty of it is space; and if there is one thing the colonizing impulse requires it is space—whether it is the unfenced acres of the tundra's open space, the uninhabited reaches of outer space, or the unmapped and unmappable universes of cyberspace. All possess what the imperialistic instinct requires: a seemingly infinite space upon which to impose its infinite appetite for domination, and upon which to turn its covetous, colonizing gaze.

Infinity thus becomes a master trope for the colonizing impulse, as Frederic Jameson observes in "Modernism and Imperialism." Similarly, the "Great North Road" of E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* is the insidious materialization of that impulse. The road leading to infinity becomes a trope of colonial penetration into the Edenic. As Jameson observes,

for infinity in this sense, this new grey placelessness, as well as what prepares it, also bears another familiar name. It is in Forster’s imperialism, or Empire, to give it its period designation. It is Empire which stretches the roads out to infinity, beyond the bounds and the borders of the national state. (323)

The Road effects the conjunction between the infinite and the imperial. Upon just such a "Great North Road," I too had traveled into this borderland. It was called the Alkan Highway, and it stretched for several thousand miles through Canada, the Yukon Territory, and Alaska, ever winding its way toward its Edenic goal, like a serpent intent on corrupting the object of its relentless penetration. As with Forster's Great North Road, it too carried a tide of colonists northward, though all were well-disguised as missionaries, gold miners, fur trappers, and more recently as tourists and bush-teachers. Yet, all bore the tell-tale mark of the colonist, whether they admitted it or not, like the traveller of Forster's Great North Road:

In the motorcar was another type, whom nature favors—the Imperial. Healthy, ever in motion, it hopes to inherit the earth. . . . Strong is the temptation to acclaim it as a superyeoman, who carries his country's virtues overseas. But the imperialist is not what he thinks or seems. He is a destroyer. He prepares the way for cosmopolitanism, and though his ambitions may be fulfilled, the earth that he inherits will be grey. (323)

A Case Study in Composing the Conflicts:
The Logging Industry and Cultural Imperialism
The inroads into the seemingly infinite Alaskan landscape did not end in Anchorage, however. The Alkan Highway had reproduced itself as it were in the form of smaller, but no less penetrating roads—built by men who were indeed the Alaskan counterparts of Forster’s Imperial type—“healthy, ever in motion,” employed by the Chugiak Timber Co., the Cook Inlet Power Co., Exxon Oil, and Glacier Coal Inc, who were indeed hoping to “inherit” this earth, whose
virgin stands of spruce and vast deposits of oil and coal they coveted with a collective colonizing gaze. The abundance of natural resources on the Athabascan reservation lands mirrored the resource-rich lands of Native American peoples in general, as Ward Churchill observes in *Indians R Us*:

> the fifty-million-odd acres . . . [of] reservation lands have proven to be extraordinarily resource rich, holding an estimated two-thirds of all U.S. domestic uranium reserves, about a quarter of the already accessible low-sulfur coal, as much as a fifth of the oil and natural gas, as well as substantial deposits of copper, iron, gold, and zeolite. (40)

Thus, the ever-propagating logging roads that encompassed the Reservation, and the proposed ice road linking it to Anchorage, may also be construed as tropes for colonial penetration of the Edenic garden, coveted for the seemingly infinite resources it possesses. The pristine homeland of the indigene became the site of contestation between the commercial enterprises of the transnational corporations and the subsistence hunting and fishing activities of the native. One of the sites where this contest was played out was the primeval forest into which the logging roads were built, for these woods became the locus of racial conflict between whites and Athabascans inasmuch as the logging enterprises conducted in them tipped the balance of power during the critical moose-hunting season in favor of the loggers.

These logged-out areas comprised ideal browsing habitat for the moose, which were drawn to them in large numbers, and which were slaughtered in large numbers by the loggers who merely had to run to their trucks, grab a high-powered rifle, take aim, and shoot—whereas the Athabascans had to cruise the back-roads for hours in their pick-up trucks hoping for a chance encounter with a moose, or else hike miles off-road to find their quarry. Thus, not only were the logging operations drastically reducing the moose population, but they were exacerbating racial tensions between whites and Athabascans, for while the winter larders of the loggers were crammed with moose meat, those of the natives remained empty. Moose and salmon were the principal sources of meat in the Athabascan diet. Consequently, any activity that threatened these sources of subsistence would inevitably generate intense hostility.

This was but one of several racially charged, environmental conflicts that not only problematized relations between Athabascans and white, but which impacted pedagogy in the composition classroom. Suffice to say, these logging roads and their counterparts—the North slope haul road, the Trans-Alaskan Pipeline, the Alkan Highway, the Trans-Continental Railroad, The Oregon Trail, the Bozeman Trail, and The Great North Road—effect a conjunction of infinity and imperialism. They are the conduit by which imperialism has been extended into the seeming infinite spaces of the American heartland in the Nineteenth century and the Alaskan interior in the Twentieth, even as it is now colonizing the infinite reaches of outer space on the Space Shuttle super-highway, and the infinite realms of cyberspace on the Information Super Highway. Cyberspace and outer space are but the latest “territories” coveted by the
colonial gaze, realms without borders and beyond the boundaries, where the imperialistic urge is free to impose itself without constraint or concern for ethics, which are always imposed retrospectively as a check on colonial excesses but too late to do the victims any good. The only difference is that the inroads into the internet are paved, not with tar, but with rhetoric.

These logging roads, and the commercial enterprise they serve, are but one legacy of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement (1971)—the notorious, neocolonial document that was as much a death warrant for the indigenous subculture as it was a birth certificate for the dominant, Euro-American culture as reincarnated in the Edenic home of the indigene. The settlement purported to bring to closure the colonization of native lands; in reality, however, it perpetuated the colonizing enterprise through neocolonial means, in effect bringing to catastrophic closure the process of cultural genocide. The document is a classic example of neocolonial conscription in which the ends of a more colonial era are reinscribed through neocolonial means—specifically through a system of seeming rewards which conscript the native into a more Euro-American lifestyle, in the process increasing his or her alienation from the indigenous subculture, whose eradication is thus accelerated.

To wit, the Athabascans surrendered their legal status as a “reservation,” and the separate nation status that went with it, as recognized by the Indian Reorganization Act of the 19th century. Henceforth they would be known as the Nyotek Native Corporation—a name which reflects a far greater degree of commercial conscription, and which evidences the complicity of language—of the signifying process—in the neocolonial enterprise of oppression. The Athabascans also surrendered all claims to the abundant natural resources on their lands. As Ward Churchill asserts, “the Alaska native people are being converted into landless ‘village corporations’ in order that the oil under their territories may be tapped...” even as their status as an independent nation is undermined (41).

The Athabascans, in short, were no longer to be recognized as an indigenous people, but as fellow players in the American Materialist Dream, as evinced by their designation as a “corporation.” The Word, whether used by the politician or the pedagogue, can be either an instrument of emancipation or oppression. As deployed by the authors of the A.N.L.C.S., the neocolonial Word is clearly a conduit for cultural genocide. The document thus makes evident the accuracy of Foucault’s assertion that power circulates through discourse—a statement with profound implications for emancipatory resistance struggle, for it suggests that the critical arena in which to wage such struggle is discourse: whomever controls the Word determines whether the Word is to be used for oppressive or emancipatory purposes.

In return for signing the A.N.L.C.S. the Athabascans were rewarded in a variety of ways, all of which foregrounded conscription into a Euro-American lifestyle: they received 350,000 dollars and 120,000 acres from the state, twenty years free electricity from the Cook Inlet Power Co., a customized, redwood
home for each family from the Chugiak Timber Co, a monthly check from Exxon Oil for every man, woman, and child, and a state-of-the-art, K-12 school. Talk about Greeks bearing false gifts!

The two primary vehicles for translating into reality the cultural colonialism incarnate in the small print of the A.N.L.C.S. were the transnational corporation and the reservation school. It was not the first time the government colluded with commercial enterprises to oppress the native; indeed, this unholy matrimony of politics, economics and education reinscribed a longstanding tradition of collusion between the Bureau of Indian Affairs and various corporations. Again Churchill’s observations are instructive:

The BIA has utilized its plenary and trust capacities to negotiate contracts with major mining corporations "in behalf of" its "Indian wards" which pay pennies on the dollar of conventional mineral royalty rates. Further, the BIA has typically exempted such corporations from any obligation to reclaim whatever reservation lands have been mined, or even to perform basic environmental cleanup of nuclear and other forms of waste. (41)

Thus, if the political, military, and religious institutions of the Euro-American culture had initiated the enterprise of colonialism among indigenous peoples, the commercial and educational institutions were now conscripted not only to sustain that process but to bring it to catastrophic closure in Alaska, as they had in the "lower forty-eight." This New Wave of Neo Colonialism is far more insidious and effective in bringing to closure the process of cultural genocide insofar as it enlists the native’s collusion in the process through a system of seeming rewards, in the form of dollars and education—the dual currencies whose possession is a prerequisite for participation in the American Materialist Dream, and which are respectively dispensed in the borderlands of the indigene by the transnational corporation and the reservation school.

Thus, while their parents received monthly checks from Exxon Oil, free electricity from Cook Inlet Power, and free redwood homes from Chugiak Timber, the Athabascan students received a free hot lunch and a college-prep education. In the process, they were unwittingly conscripted into a Euro-American lifestyle many of them purported to resist. This lifestyle was the real commodity they were being sold, the true aim of the A.N.L.C.S., and the most destructive legacy of the "settlement." As Churchill asserts, "the ultimate goal of transnational corporatism is the creation of an utterly Eurocentric global monoculture as a basis for profit maximization. . ." (144). The enterprise, however, accelerates the process of cultural genocide inasmuch as the proliferation of the dominant culture necessarily entails the erosion of the indigenous subculture. Holly Sklar endorses Churchill’s views:

Corporations not only advertise products, they promote lifestyles rooted in consumption, patterned largely after the United States. . . They look forward to a postnational age in which [Western] social, economic, and political values are transformed into universal values . . . a world economy in which all national economics beat to the rhythm of transnational corporate capitalism. (qtd. in Churchill 144)
If the circulation of power through discourse requires an economy of discourse, then similarly the manifestation of power through culture requires an economy of cultures—in other words, a monoculture. The economic enterprises of Exxon Oil, Chugiak Timber, Glacial Coal, and Cook Inlet Power, as enacted on the lands of the Athabascan, were complicit in this process of cultural genocide—a process sanctioned in the small print of the A.N.L.C.S., which was simultaneously a death certificate for the Athabascan subculture and a birth certificate for a dominant Euro-American culture in the borderlands of the Alaskan indigene.

The racially-charged, environmental conflicts were not the only conflicts associated with the logging enterprise on Athabascan lands. The very Timber Camp itself—an all-white community of Chugiak Timber employees, located four miles from the reservation—was situated on the ancestral site of the Athabascan's village, which had been moved in the wake of the tsunami generated by the epic '64 earthquake. The permanent presence of a community of whites on the site of their ancestral village was an intolerable affront to many Athabascans, who campaigned vociferously for the relocation of the timber camp to less politicized terrain. Though abandoned by them, the site was hallowed ground, and the thought of its being occupied by their corporate oppressors was a bone of contention with a significant percentage of the Athabascan population. Finally, the allegedly racist hiring and firing policies of the timber camp, which employed few if any Athabascans, was another source of conflict between the two communities. Moreover, as both populations were heavily armed and prone to excessive alcohol consumption, the conditions for racial violence were as ripe as they were everpresent. I will speak to the pedagogical implications of these cultural conflicts in due course.

If anything draws me back, it will be the desire to experience once more the freedom of unconfined spaces—a freedom that comprises a grimly ironic counterpoint to the narrow constraints of racial stereotypes imposed upon the land’s indigenous peoples. Here every feature was fused into a landscape as monochromatic as it was monolithic, as if the topos was a trope for the totalizing, unitary, hegemonic discourse of the colonizer. Yet, in that place the spirit feels free, and perhaps it is this aspect of the Far North that makes it the ideal milieu for actualizing the aims of Native American resistance struggle, even as its subarctic sameness figuratively reprises the cultural hegemony of the colonizer. If the landscape’s vast silence is an appropriate emblem for the silencing of the Other, then perhaps it may also serve as the perfect counterpoint to the dissonant noise of marginalized students coming into voice for the first time.
Composing the Conflicts: The Classroom and Cultural Colonialism

To the Indian kid the white boarding school comes as a terrible shock. He is taken from his warm womb, to a strange, cold place. It is like being pushed out of a cozy kitchen into a howling blizzard. The schools are better now. . . . They look good from the outside—modern and expensive. The teachers understand the kids a little better, use more psychology and less stick. But in those fine new buildings, Indian children still commit suicide because they are lonely amid all that noise and activity. I know of a ten year old who hanged herself. . . . The schools leave a scar. We enter them confused and bewildered and we leave them the same way. When we enter the school we at least know that we are Indians. We come out half red and half white, not knowing what we are.

Lame Deer 24,25

Lame Deer's description of schooling among Native Americans is significant for a number of reasons. First, it reenforces the findings of a body of scholarship attesting to the violent effects of acculturation in general, and of the "cultural bleaching" that occurs in schools in particular.1 More importantly, Lame Deer's depiction of the reservation school, though written over a quarter century ago and many thousands of miles removed from Alaska, comprised an accurate portrait of E.L. Elmendorf school in the Athabascan village of Nyotek. It too was a "modern and expensive" institution though the State had picked up the five million dollar tab for the school's construction. The school's practitioners were likewise more humanistic in their methods than the old boarding school instructors. The ends their pedagogy pursued, however, were the same: "initiation" of the native child into the dominant culture through mastery of its discourse conventions—an aim which implied the eradication of the indigenous subculture inasmuch as it required of the native child a shift in allegiance away from that culture.

In many instances these new borderland schools became not only the educational centers, but the social hubs of the village, as they were quickly appropriated by the Athabascans for bingo and basketball leagues, for potlatches and native olympics, blurring from the outset the boundaries that normally separate the classroom and the community, and transforming the school itself into a "contact zone" where the ideologies of the dominant culture and the indigenous subculture were brought into oppositional play.

The school, like its counterparts throughout indigenous Alaska, was situated at the geographical center of the village, thus reinscribing on a physical plane the asymmetrical power relations that relegated the native to the margins, while reserving the center for the colonial. When seen from the air through the struts of a bush plane, one is immediately struck by the institutionalized incongruity of the modern, blue, cinder-block facility with the gravel roads and track-housing that encompassed it.

The shock of my first encounter with the Alaskan interior prefigured the shock of my first contact with its indigenous people in general, and with my
writing students in particular. Rather than being reciprocated by the Athabascans, my friendly greetings were answered with averted, downcast eyes—inside and outside the classroom. Apparently it would require much more than a kind word from a new bush teacher to surmount the differences between us, to bridge the gulf that divided the colonized "self" from the colonized "other" as effectively as the Cook Inlet separated the Edenic, western shore of the native from the "civilized," eastern shore of the colonizer.

This attitude of wary mistrust in the face of the colonizer's gregarious gaze reprises the attitude of Chinese immigrants toward whites in San Francisco in the nineteenth century, as Rodanzo Adams observes in *Interracial Marriage in Hawaii: A Study of the Mutually Conditioned Processes of Acculturation and Amalgamation*:

Doubtless there are in San Francisco white men and women who are well known to some of the Chinese and who are trusted, but the normal attitude of the Chinese toward an unintroduced white stranger with a friendly manner is one of distrust. (319)

I mention this experience to underscore the cross-cultural conflicts that impinge upon the classroom and that influence instruction in the borderlands. I want to examine the problematic mission of the reservation school, specifically its complicity in the enterprise of cultural colonization. I want to focus on the manner in which administrators, practitioners, students, and support staff are unwittingly conscripted into this enterprise, and I want to elaborate on the pedagogical implications of a series of racial conflicts associated with schooling on the reservation.

One of the most grimly ironic aspects of the A.N.L.C.S. was that it enlisted the complicity of the native in the genocide of his or her own subculture. Nothing accelerated the process of "cultural bleaching" as much as did these schools. As Ward Churchill argues, the dissemination of technology and knowledge by corporations and classrooms, respectively, helps perpetuate "the system of global domination from which the genocidal colonization of Native America stemmed and by which it is continued" (226). In signing the settlement, the Athabascans in effect were signing their own death warrant as a culturally distinct people. As Patricia Bizzell observes in "Marxist Ideas in Composition Studies," "dominant classes exercise their ideological control so thoroughly that the very people they are oppressing assent to the oppression. The marginalized . . . instead of hating their oppressors, wish only to become like them" (57).

**The Practitioner and Cultural Imperialism**

Though naively unaware of it at the time, I was regarded by many Athabascans as the incarnation of the "White shaman," the "Indian wannabe," the "New Age hobbyist," who appropriates traditional Native American ideology in the quest for his or her own spirituality. I bore many of the traits that characterized these cultural colonialists as well:
white, mostly urban, affluent or affluenty reared, well-schooled, young (or youngish) people of both genders who . . . are thoroughly dis-eased by the socioeconomic order into which they were born and their seemingly predestined roles within it. Many of them openly seek . . . a viable option with which they may not only alter their own individual fates, but transform the overall systemic realities they correctly perceive as having generated these fates in the first place. (Churchill 230)

Was not my disenchantment with the status quo in the Lower Forty-eight the primary reason I had ventured North in the first place? Was I not fleeing in revulsion from a socio-economic order that I could no longer identify with, whose principles and practices were so at odds with my own? And yet in promoting the advantages of a college-prep education to these borderland learners was I not encouraging them to seek assimilation into the very socio-economic order I had renounced, in the process perpetuating the cannibalizing dominion of this order, as well as the destruction of the very thing I would have preserved—a Native American subculture whose holistic views and magical world outlook I identified with more closely then I did with the mores and assumptions of Euro-American culture. Wasn’t my own alienation from the culture in which I had been reared the most powerful argument against assimilation into that order? Moreover, wasn’t my attempt to reform that order in my own small way merely another means of reinscribing it along authoritarian lines, as Churchill implies?

many of the most alienated—and therefore most committed to achieving fundamental social change—eventually opt for the intellectual/emotional reassurance of prepackaged “radical solutions.” Typically, these assume the form of yet another battery of “isms” based on all the same core assumptions as the system being opposed . . . marxism . . . council communism . . . feminism, environmentalism . . . (230-31)

To which one might add cognitivism, expressivism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. Further, Churchill implies that the academic, and the alienation that defines his or her critical stance, is perhaps the worst offender in this process:

A mainstay occupation of this coterie has been academia wherein they typically maintain an increasingly . . . detached “critical” discourse, calculated mainly to negate whatever transformative value or utility might be lodged in the . . . oppositional political engagement they formerly pursued. (231)

As an academic, I contributed to the colonization and alienation of my students as a consequence of my uncritical faith in the alien topics I obliged them to study, and in the act of “study,” itself, which presumes an alienating distance from the object/subject being studied. Thus, the adult Athabascans, and many of the students to whom they transmitted their views, were quick to see that to which I was blinded: my unwitting complicity in the process of colonization. Churchill writes:
As long-term participants in the national liberation struggle of American Indians... we have been forced into knowing the nature of colonialism very well... we understand that the colonization we experience finds its origin in the matrix of European culture... our struggle must be explicitly anti-colonial in its form, content, and aspirations. (233-34)

What Churchill observes of the European applied with equal veracity to myself, as a descendant of Europeans, and as one reared in a Western European ideological climate:

>You have after all been colonized far longer than we, and therefore much more completely. In fact, your colonization has by now been consolidated to such an extent that... you no longer even see yourselves as having been colonized. The result is that you've become self-colonizing, conditioned to be so self-identified with your own oppression that you've lost your ability to see it for what it is, much less to resist it in any coherent way. (234)

As a bush teacher, I was an unwitting accomplice in the process of cultural theft, perpetuating "Europe's synthetic and predatory tradition, the tradition of colonization, genocide, racism, and ecocide" (249). In my own eyes I was Mr. Teacher from sunny Southern California who had come to enlighten their children, to banish the burden of illiteracy, to work the miracle of transforming them from adolescent Indians living in abject misery to college-bound adults, fully invested in the American Materialist Dream, to confer upon them the blessing of a college-prep education. I was the "white shaman" come to "heal" them from the debilitating effects of "illiteracy," poverty, drugs, alcohol, and low self esteem.

Lacking children of my own, I would look to these surrogates to satisfy my own needs for a family. Until I was able to replicate myself genetically, I would reproduce myself through my students, would reincarnate myself in them, ideologically and intellectually. Education would become the means of eternalizing the self in these surrogate offspring. What did it matter if their skin was brown and mine white, their hair black as a raven's instead of blond as wheat, and their English broken, and pronounced in thick, guttural accents instead of rendered in standard English? These factors would just make the final transformation all the more singular—which would redound to my credit when visiting bureaucrats from across the water witnessed what miracles of academic literacy I worked on these marginalized, borderland learners—when they beheld, if not the issue of my loins, than at least the surrogate progeny of my intellect.

Even my unitary teacherly discourse, dispensed from a podium at the front of the class, was a form of oppression inasmuch as it divested language of its heteroglossia in the classroom, thus reinscribing on a microcosmic scale the cultural genocide enacted macrocosmically in the name of monoculturalism. As Foucault asserts, the circulation of power through discourse is facilitated by an economy of discourses ("Power/Knowledge" 93).
Not only the practitioner and his or her discourse, but the canon he or she privileges is a vehicle of cultural imperialism, insofar as it reproduces the ideology, mores, and traditions of the colonizing culture in texts which simultaneously reenforce negative stereotypes of the native or which represent the indigene's land as a wilderness in need of "development," as a "motherlode" of natural resources begging to be exploited, or as an Edenic garden encouraging the return of Adam and Eve. Master narratives like *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* reinscribe the settler impulse, and to the extent they do this accelerate the process of cultural genocide. They do this as well by universalizing the language, mores, and traditions of the colonizer while deflating those of the indigene.

The allegedly racist hiring practices of the school district and the principal was yet another source of conflict between Athabascans and whites. At E.L. Elmendorf Athabascans were hired as janitors and teacher-aides, as cooks and cook-helpers, but never as teachers. Indeed, the smooth functioning of the neocolonial apparatus requires not only the conscription of the subaltern into the myriad low-level positions that perpetuate his or her oppression, but the complicity of the subaltern in this process. Again a system of seeming rewards—in the form of dental and health care, union protection, paid leaves, sick days, a steady paycheck—functions to defuse any seditious impulses. Indeed, in a population where unemployment is high to begin with, a steady job of any sort is a precious commodity—one that provides much needed income for the native worker's extended family. As Homi Bhabha observes:

Thus marginalized or individualized, the colonial subject as bearer of racial topologies and racist stereotypes is reintroduced to the circulation of power as a "productive capacity" within that form of government called "indirect rule." The co-option of traditional elites into the colonial administration is then seen to be a way of harnessing the ambitious life-instinct of the natives. (76)

Though the native support staff could hardly be called "elites," their conscription into the "colonial administration" had the identical effect of subverting the seditious impulse—in other words, such employment was an instrument of social control.

The allegedly racist hiring practices of the principal became a flashpoint of racial conflict that polarized relations between community and school, even as it embroiled both in a two year legal battle that ultimately involved the Alaska State Trooper's Office, the State Supreme Court, the State Human Rights Commission, the Tribal Council, the School Board, the metropolitan media and the F.B.I. The school secretary, an Athabascan woman, "resigned" over a personality conflict with the principal, who then hired a white woman from the timber camp to replace her. This "preelection" of a white woman so incensed the Tribal Council that they brought a suit against the school district, demanding the involuntary transfer of the principal and seeking the eviction of all non-natives from the reservation, with the exception of those employed as teachers by the school.
Race, Conflict, and Radical Pedagogy

The question then arises, of what value might such local cultural conflicts be to a more emancipatory pedagogy? Though these conflicts were a constant source of conversation in the community and in the teachers' lounge, they were rarely spoken of inside the classroom, much less utilized as suitable material for critical inquiry, as legitimate "texts" for study. Recently, however, many compositionists have argued the efficacy of grounding writing instruction in the local conflicts and lived realities of marginalized students, as a vehicle for effecting meaningful reform in the community beyond the classroom and as a means for fostering critical literacy and radical subjectivity within it. Indeed, the attitude of the Basic Writing Pioneers (Rose, Trilling, Bruffee, Shaughnessy et al) toward conflict became the touchstone for Min-Zhan Lu's compelling critique of the aims, assumptions, and methodologies of basic writing pedagogy, as enunciated in her article "Conflict and Struggle." Lu for instance calls into question the assumption that the "conflicts" experienced by the bicultural basic writer seeking "initiation" into the dominant culture are temporary and can be reduced if not eliminated by such activities as collaborative learning. In reality, such methods have proven ineffectual for helping "students cope with the conflicts swamping their psychological borders"—as Lame Deer's narrative evidences (896).

Lu calls upon these "gatekeepers, converters, and accommodationists" to "reposition" their pedagogy in a manner that incorporates and accounts for the conflicted lived realities of the basic writing student, instead of seeking to paper-over these conflicts. Lu would replace the unethical, impractical, and mythical goal of assimilation into the dominant culture with the aim of helping these students "become active residents of the borderlands" by grounding instruction in their "cultural dissonance" and in "narratives of the borderlands" that would "draw upon student's perception of conflict as a constructive resource" (900, 888, 897). She concludes that basic writing practitioners need to "find ways of foregrounding conflict" in the "generation of meaning" (910).

Lu's theories receive strong endorsement from Thomas Fox who not only asserts that basic writing pedagogy needs to "acknowledge cultural and political influences on writing," but goes so far as to redefine basic writing, not as a "set of techniques," but as "a product of culture," as "cultural conflict" ("Basic Writing as Cultural Conflict" 65). Like Lu, Fox concludes that "a basic writing pedagogy ought to help students explore the cultural conflicts and continuities that attend their entrance into university" (81). Fox's redefinition of the basic writing classroom reinscribes Pratt's view of the writing class as an agonistic "contact zone" where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple-with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, and their aftermaths" and where pedagogy should seek "for ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of their history" (33,40). Richard Miller also argues the centrality of grounding writing instruction in the "cultural conflicts that seem to define and limit [students'] lived experience" (407).
These conflicts provided the answer to the most problematic riddle I faced: "If not a college-prep curricula and a basic-writing approach to it, then what? If not the Great Books and the Conventions of Academic Discourse, then what? And why? And how?" How specifically might these cultural conflicts be posed to subaltern and/or basic writing students as problems to be researched, debated, written about and resolved?

First, writing instruction could be grounded in a number of generative themes pertaining to these local conflicts, and as part of a broader inquiry into the causes and effects of neocolonial oppression. This systematic inquiry would be driven by a number of writing questions: should logging operations be suspended to stabilize the moose population; should the timber camp be relocated to less politicized terrain; are the hiring practices of the timber camp and the school racially motivated; should the Athabascans have signed the A.N.L.C.S.; should they seek its repeal; should they have surrendered their rights to oil, coal, and timber reserves on native lands; should they have surrendered their status as a reservation; should race be a factor in the hiring policies of the school district and the timber company; does the tribal council have the right to evict non-natives from native lands; do non-natives have the right to hunt, fish, and live on native lands; does the Constitution of the oppressor apply on the lands of the oppressed; should transnational corporations be responsible for the reclamation of native lands, including the clean-up of toxic waste?

These were just a few of the myriad problem-posing questions that could be posed in a Freirean sense to these students. A whole array of pedagogical activities could be employed to supplement instruction in these generative themes.

What are the advantages of grounding writing instruction in the conflicted lived realities of borderland learners? A number of them spring to mind: first, the student's interest is engaged on a more immediate level if a connection can be established between what is learned in the classroom and what is lived in the world that encompasses it. Moreover, encouraging students to devise an action plan for resolving the conflicts facilitates the realization of Lu's pedagogical goal of helping these students to become "active residents of the borderlands" instead of passive conscripts into an alien culture that has and continues to oppress them. More importantly, when students are given the opportunity to name their conflicted world with the critical word, they not only discover their own, anti-colonial voices as speakers and writers, but gain a measure of liberatory distance from that world. And if that world has been oppressive, fraught with the debilitating tensions of biculturalism, the act of distancing oneself from it through language is a blow struck against oppression. As Ira Shor observes, the very act of naming their world "offers students distance on reality" (17).

Shor's view of the emancipatory potential of language is echoed by the psychologist Otto Rank who asserts that the aim of all language is not merely to "identify with what it imitates"—as is the case with the "other" who identifies with the colonizer by imitating his language—"but to dominate it and make itself independent of it"—as is the case with the "other" who answers colonialism back.
with a postcolonial discourse comprised of all that was formerly silenced (240). As C. H. Knoblauch observes: "the emergence of reality is only made possible through a struggle to articulate" (125).

If the Word has been an instrument of colonial domination as wielded by the priest, the politician and the pedagogue, then the Word, similarly, can become the vehicle for postcolonial, liberatory resistance struggle as enunciated by the marginalized pupil and his or her indigenous people. Language—the ability to name one's own conflicted world—is thus the medium for the subaltern's liberatory resistance struggle, language that is not a colonial "echo from without," but a postcolonial "resonance from within" (Proust 64).

For the subaltern who names his or her own world, identity becomes no longer an act of imitation but of self-creation, inseparably yoked to a world-creation in words. The very act of naming the world is a postcolonial move that helps "the ego to magnify itself and to dominate the world around" (Rank 251). For many borderland learners the decolonization of the mind through postcolonial discourse is a first critical step on the path to active subject position, to becoming active residents of the borderlands. For these marginalized students the critical word and the act of interpreting their conflicted world is a vehicle for repossessing those sacred topoi—physical and psychical—from which they have been dispossessed. If their sacred lands cannot be restored to their pre-contact, edenic state, at least these lost, colonized realms of the self can be decolonized and re-territorialized by their rightful owners. If they cannot be liberated from the reservation, perhaps they can at least be liberated from the reservation of the self in which their identity has been so narrowly and so stereotypically defined. And upon this emancipated ground perhaps they shall be able to gain a psychic foothold upon which to construct a new, radical, red subjectivity—one as grounded in a postcolonial present as it is rooted to a precolonial, native past; one that allows them to coexist amid colonial interests, whether economic or educational, without sacrificing what is essential to their survival as Native Americans and to their happiness as human beings.

---

Notes

1In her article, "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing," Min-Zhan Lu cites the research of a number of scholars attesting to the debilitating and enduring effects of biculturalism, including Irving Howe, Thomas Ferrell, Leonard Kriegel, and W.E.B. DuBois.

2I am in the process of completing a book in which a chapter is devoted to elaborating the conflict-oriented aspect of the emancipatory, borderland pedagogy I am espousing in this paper. A second chapter is likewise devoted to a more detailed description of the diverse subaltern discourses extant in the classroom, the tensions between them, and the constructive uses of those tensions. A third chapter provides a more detailed articulation of the manner in which my pedagogy foregrounded non-canonical, narratives of the borderlands.
Works Cited


