Composing the Eco Wars: Toward a Literacy of Resistance

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It is to the reality which mediates men [and women], and to the perception of that reality held by educators and people, that we must go to find the program content of education. The investigation of what I have called the people's "thematic universe"—the complex of their "generative themes"—inaugurates the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom.

Paulo Freire

The environment is a category rich with possibilities for oppositional pedagogies, and every bit as relevant as the categories of race, class, and gender for realizing those possibilities. The environment comprises, as well, an effective pedagogical terrain for more fully realizing the relevance of Freirean praxis to American classrooms insofar as it comprises a useful and pragmatic means of realizing the oft neglected, second component of Freirean praxis: transforming critical analysis into political action. After Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, there can be little doubt that the environment is a site of collusion between transnational corporations and the U.S. government, as well as a site of fierce contestation between these parties and environmental groups, as well as a site of oppression for all Americans inasmuch as saturation of our air, soil, food, and water with carcinogenic compounds for the last half century calls into question not only the long term health of every individual in America, but of the planet and of the species. Thus, the environment is not only a category with individual implications, but with local, regional, national and global implications. It is a site that warrants our involvement and our resistance, as citizens and as writing teachers—as such, it is a useful terrain for realizing Freirean praxis, for evolving a literacy that is not only practical and political, but ethical—for enacting as Christy Friend advocates, a literacy and an ethics of "doing" (560).

In this article I want to discuss the implications for critical literacy and oppositional pedagogy of racial conflicts immanent in a very localized environment: an Athabascan Indian Reservation in Alaska. I want to show how those conflicts comprise a useful and pragmatic context for realizing Freirean praxis, in both the analytical and the political arenas. I want to establish the critical and complicitous role that signification plays in the enterprises of cultural imperialism and genocide by analyzing two "texts": The Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act (1971) and the Environmental Impact Study of Darbyshire and
Associates (1981). And finally, I want to establish the pedagogical relevance of foregrounding the environment and the conflicts associated with it to the emerging discourse of Eco-composition as a whole, and the relevance of both to the project of critical literacy.

If there is one thing I learned as a bush teacher on an Athabascan Indian Reservation in Alaska it is this: the environment is a critical topos. It is the locus of traditional Athabascan identity, as it is for traditional Native American identity in general. Reconnecting to this landscape is thus critical to the Athabascan's current efforts to recuperate an "authentic" indigenous identity. Thus, the Athabascans' struggle to recover "title" to their native land is inseparable from their struggle to recover a sense of Self: in repossessing one they repossess the Other. Unfortunately, this indigenous landscape is not only the object of the Other's nostalgic, alienated, and recolonizing gaze, but the object as well of the colonizer's covetous, profit-minded gaze as embodied in a conglomeration of transnational corporations: Placer Amex, Exxon Oil, Mobil Oil, Chevron USA, Simasko Production Co., Kodiak Lumber Mills, Diamond Chuitna, etc. The land of the Athabascan, and of the Alaska native peoples in general, is a fecund topos of indigenous identity and natural resources. As such, it is the arena of a critical conflict between indigenous peoples and transnational corporations, between subsistence and cash-based economic systems. Further, the needs of one are mutually opposed to the needs of the other insofar as the native's subsistence requires the preservation and sustenance of habitats that the transnational corporations want to "develop," "harvest," or otherwise "use up." It comes as no surprise then that this conflict is potentially a violent one, imbricated as it is with racial enmities.

The fundamental questions driving this inquiry are the following: to what extent could these local cultural conflicts, and particularly the conflicts over the Athabascan's environment, be used in the writing classroom as a vehicle not only for the acquisition of academic and critical literacy, but to facilitate counter-hegemonic resistance? Could such an approach be used to revitalize the second aspect of Freirean praxis: the translation of analysis into action on a local level to resist the oppression of one culture by another? Finally, could such a reconfigured borderland praxis dialogically reinforce other alter/native or oppositional pedagogies: Foxfire, contact-zone, and conflict-oriented models—and if so, how?

In this article I want to posit some responses to these questions while articulating a model for a conflict-oriented pedagogy, for a pedagogy privileging the constructive uses of local cultural conflicts in general, and particularly the conflicts associated with the environment. Further, the conflict-oriented pedagogy I am describing here is as equally dialogic, though more politicized than the model enunciated by Gerald Graff inasmuch as it foregrounds not the alien conflicts of the professorate, but the immediate environmental, educational, cultural and political conflicts of the Athabascan—conflicts that lie at the heart of the Athabascans' contemporary resistance struggle, which is nothing if not a
struggle for ownership, agency, identity, and authority, for the right to govern their own affairs and say their own Word—conflicts whose resolution will determine the fate of their ancestral culture in both the immediate and foreseeable future. To be ethical, literacy must be political—must be seen as the inevitable byproduct of the politicization of language use in the classroom.

Composing the Eco Wars: The Transnational Corporation vs. The Natives of Nyotek
The violent conflict between the Athabascan subculture and the dominant Euro-American culture was played out in a number of critical arenas. Among them, the environment was one of the most volatile sites of this cultural clash. It became its own “contact zone” of bicultural conflict (Pratt 33)—a topos that reinscribed the hierarchical, asymmetrical power relations between dominant culture and indigenous subculture. The violence of these environmental conflicts evinced the high stakes that were in play: huge profits for the Transnational Corporations vs. the viability of the Athabascan’s subsistence lifestyle. Both sides were thus dependent on the resources of the land for their economic survival, though the resources on which they depended were different. In the case of the transnational corporations, the vast reserves of timber, coal, and oil were the bedrock of their economic survival in the borderlands; for the Athabascans, on the other hand, subsistence was intimately linked to the strength of the moose herds and the salmon runs. Thus, these environmental conflicts were contested across a broad field of topoi ranging from the off-shore oil rigs to the remote moose habitat and the logging roads that penetrated them, to the equally remote Beluga coal fields. Further, these conflicts revealed the peculiar intimacy that characterizes colonizer-colonized relations inasmuch as the Athabascans were complicit in the commercial exploitation of the oil, timber, and coal reserves, having “sold” the rights to them to the transnational corporations as part of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement (ANLCS) in 1971.

This notorious, neocolonial “settlement” reinscribed the duplicitous signifying practices historically deployed in “treaties” with the Native American. As with the treaties “signed” by their counterparts in the lower forty-eight, the language of this “settlement” contained ominous implications for the subsistence lifeways of the Athabascans—implications which became realities in the years following the agreement. For signing the settlement the Athabascans were awarded a lump sum of $350,000 and “title” to 120,000 acres of land that was already theirs. What they surrendered, however, had even graver implications: their status as a “separate nation,” as recognized by the Indian Reorganization Act of the 19th Century, and title to all the surrounding lands. This was the real, hidden agenda of the government agencies negotiating on behalf of transnational corporations: to wrest title of the land away from the Alaskan natives in order to gain possession of the vast quantities of natural resources embedded in those lands. Thus, the “settlement” was not an enlightened act of “recognition” that signaled a new dawn in colonizer-colonized relations, but rather a reinscription
of the oppressive practices that have historically characterized those relations. The ANLCS was in reality a document that legalized the theft of native lands, thus reinscribing the historical treachery of the treaty-making process while perpetuating the asymmetrical power-relations that have for centuries favored the dominant culture to the disadvantage of the indigenous subculture.

The settlement reinscribed traditional colonizing strategies of domination inasmuch as it offered the Alaskan natives immediate material rewards—cash taking the place of alcohol, blankets, beads, and rifles—insofar as it used a divide and conquer strategy inducing a few Athabascans (whom the colonizer designated to be the “official” representatives) to sign away the rights of the entire people, and to the extent that it masked a theft as a trade. Colonialism had merely assumed a more innocent, but no less genocidal, neocolonial guise.

One of the most debilitating legacies of the ANLCS was the loss of nation status it signified. This was accomplished with nothing more than the devious stoke of a pen, and underscores yet again the culpability of signifying practices in colonization. Until the indigene is able to wage resistance in the arena of signification, he and she fights a losing battle, or at least fights at an extreme disadvantage. The native Other must enter the arena of Words, which heretofore has been dominated by the colonizer, must carry his and her liberatory struggle to the colonizer in this critical terrain of conflict as well, must master the colonizer’s ink-tipped tongue if they are ever to enjoy the privilege of saying their own Word as a means of owning their own World.

Thus, with nothing greater than a blot of ink, the Athabascan nation was transformed into a corporation: the Nyotek Native Corporation—complete with a governing board whose members were selected by the colonizer, whose “business” was situated not in the native village but in the metropolis of Anchorage, whose bylaws naturally were drawn up by the colonizer, and whose votes were cast in the absence of the people they represented. This is the mechanism by which the conquest of native lands and the genocide of native lifeways is effected today. It is conquest by signification, by linguistic sleight-of-hand; it is conquest by “trade,” oppression by “partnership,” and theft by “recognition.” Though the arena of contestation has shifted from the battlefield to the board-room, the end is just the same. The native’s lands wind up in the possession of his or her colonizer; the indigene’s subsistence lifeways are supplanted by the cash-based lifestyle of his or her oppressor. However, the extension of this conflict into the realm of signification has profound implications for the borderland classroom, and for the composition classroom in particular. The bush teacher and the native students occupy a strategic topos in this struggle insofar as the Word can be used as an instrument of oppression or deployed as a vehicle for liberatory resistance. I will speak more directly to these pedagogical implications in due course.

Thus, the colonizer achieved the conquest of the Athabascan, not by invading Athabascan lands with tanks and regiments, but by making the Athabascan a business or trading partner—or more precisely, by seeming to
make the native a trading partner. As in the society at large, full partnership was denied the Athabascan—indeed, was never intended. Conscripting the Athabascan into a business relationship was merely another means of controlling the native, of compromising the Athabascan's subsistence lifestyle, of co-opting his or her subversive tendencies. The very name, "Nyotek Native Corporation," signifies the Athabascan's linguistic conscription into the cash-based economy of the colonizer. It is the corporate badge that identifies the Athabascan as a player in Transnational Corporatism. It is a signifier that also effaces their difference as a people: instead of a nation, they are now a corporation. Like their ancestral homeland, the Athabascans themselves have been given a linguistic face-life by their colonizers: one that signifies their reduction from separate nation status to the status of a minor business attempting to compete with corporate giants.

The colonizer succeeded in shifting the contest to an arena in which the colonizer enjoys a distinct advantage. Thus, possession of the Athabascan's land was gained not through military occupation or even through the influx of settlers, but with the stroke of a pen in a distant glass skyscraper, with a bit of linguistic sleight-of-hand, with the deployment of three little words: Nyotek Native Corporation. The name itself reflects the asymmetrical power relations of the colonizer and the colonized. The words "Nyotek" and "Native" are subsumed by the word "Corporation" inasmuch as they are reduced to the status of modifiers while the word "Corporation" is accorded a more dominant syntactic position as a noun and subject—a linguistic relationship that reenacts on a microcosmic plane the macroscopic marginalization of the Athabascan in the culture at large. This name "Nyotek Native Corporation" signifies not only the loss of separate nation status, but the loss of indigenous identity and the genocide of traditional Athabascan culture insofar as it connotes recruitment into a cash-based economy—one that directly threatens the Athabascan's subsistence lifestyle.

This shift in signification embodied in the ANLCS was meant to signify the dawning of a new era between native and whites in Alaska. What it signified, however, was that the more colonization changes the more it remains the same. What was represented as a break-through in colonizer-colonized relations in reality merely re-cycled the old oppressive power relations of that dynamic. That which was represented as a new dawn in those relations was in reality a twilight that signified the impending eclipse of the Athabascan culture.

Surrendering their status as a separate nation was not the only negative legacy of the ANLCS for the Athabascans. Surrendering title to the surrounding lands to a consortium of transnational corporations had an even greater impact on their subsistence lifestyle. These lands were discovered to contain vast reserves of resources long coveted by transnational corporations: coal, bauxite, oil, natural gas, and timber. It is a legacy the Athabascans share with their Native-American counterparts in the lower forty-eight. As Ward Churchill observes, "Alaska native peoples are being converted to landless village corporations in order that the oil under their territories can be tapped" (41). The transference of title to these lands from the Athabascan to these corporations, as well as the
harvesting of the resources on those lands, reinscribes the unethical collusion between big business and government agencies, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, that has historically exploited the native. 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)

The transnational corporations that gained title to the lands surrounding the Nyotek reservation similarly paid a price far below the market value of that land: $3.00 per acre for the 321 million acres in Alaska the natives surrendered title to. The corporations were similarly exempted from reclaiming the areas they had logged, mined, or drilled. As Gerry Mander asserts,

just like the Allotment Act, the Indian Reorganization Act, and the Indian Claims Commission Act, The ANLCS was a fraud in concept and execution. It was created by a Congress that was essentially acting as a surrogate for U.S. oil, mineral, and fishing companies. In terms of effective, efficient robbery and scale of deception, ANLCS makes the Allotment Act look like a dimestore burglary. (287)

The primary aim of the "settlement" was not to inaugurate a "new dawn in U.S.-Indian relations," but to "destroy native title" to the land (290). This it achieved by awarding "title" to ten percent of the Alaskan landscape, "whereas they had formerly owned 100 percent" (291). The State of Alaska was given three times that amount (30 percent) which was "earmarked for development"(291). Even the cash and the title the natives were given, however, proved to be intangible rewards. Mander continues,

not one dollar nor one acre of land was actually placed in the control of any native person. Instead, native lands were divided among twelve regions, each under the control of a native-owned corporation. . . . The people would get some money if and when the corporation made a profit by developing the wilderness (as the non-natives wanted them to do). They would never again, as a people, own or control the land. (291)

Thus, even the terms of the cash settlement were yoked to the development of their homeland. It was bad enough to have sold much of their land to the government acting as a purchase agent for various transnational corporations. Now, the natives discovered that in order to receive any money for this sale they had to "develop the wilderness." Before one dollar could be distributed to the residents of Nyotek, the new native corporation into which these monies were funneled had to turn a profit by selling rights to the resources on their lands to these larger corporations. The ANLCS was as ingenious in its predatory design as the iron-jawed traps the white settler sets for the native fur-bearing animals he hopes to turn a profit from. Thus, the Athabascans were coerced into
"developing the wilderness" to the detriment of their subsistence lifestyle. The Alaskan natives were thus victimized by a catch-22 which forced the Athabascan to profit from the destruction of his or her own homeland, and from the destruction of the subsistence lifestyle that was dependent on that land.

By the time I arrived on the reservation, the ANLCS was a subject of contentious debate among Athabascans: some congratulated themselves for having profited off the white man's greed; some argued for its repeal; some expressed keen regret that it had been signed in the first place; some directed their rage at the relatives and board members living in Anchorage who had betrayed their best interests to the whites, who had been duped by the terms of the agreement; others directed their hostility toward their white colonizers, in whatever form they assumed: loggers, bush teachers, state troopers, geologists, anthropologists, and social workers. The air was rife with racial tensions which the ANLCS and its aftermath intensified.

A look at the contents of the environmental impact study commissioned by the Nyotek tribal council and conducted by Darbyshire and Associates reveals the reasons for the Athabascans' deep concerns for their homeland. Placer Amex Inc. had placed before the tribal council a proposal to buy the rights to the huge deposits of coal discovered in the nearby Beluga Coal Field. The discovery of vast deposits of coal on Athabascan lands came as no surprise to anyone. I could hardly go for a walk along the Cook Inlet or the Chuitna River without stumbling across large chips of coal. They littered the surface as cow-chips once littered the prairie—and were an even greater source of fuel. Yet, these black chips became markers in a high-stakes struggle between Placer Amex and the tribal council. As Darbyshire and Associates' study indicates, the fate of the Athabascan's homeland was yoked to the fluctuations in the global marketplace:

As a result of the oil price increases of the mid-to-late 70s, major decisions were made by government and industry to shift emphasis from oil to coal fuels . . . This explosive demand for coal is the single most important factor affecting Beluga development. Because the field does not have the benefit of existing infrastructure, the area needs a rapidly growing and concentrated market to warrant development . . . Quantities of at least 750 million tons of coal have been identified as economically extractable for initial field development. This quite stable and predictable supply . . . is a very favorable element. (3)

Additionally, the study shows that 71,000 acres in coal leases were held by four corporations: Mobil Oil, Placer Amex, Diamond-Chuitna, and Amax Inc. The lands held by Placer Amex Inc. were located "25, 15, and 8 miles, respectively, from the village of [Nyotek]" (5).

Darbyshire and Associate's study then offers a "review of potential development scenarios" (4). For instance, Placer Amex' plans included the development of a Coal-to-Methanol Plant, the coal to be "transported via rail or conveyor belt . . . to a methanol plant at Granite Point on the east end of Trading Bay." In addition, "a self-sufficient townsite would be constructed to house . . . 1,500 workers plus their families and support personnel" (5). This portion of the review concludes with the assessment that the project "could be in
operation as early as 1987” (6). The potential environmental impacts from this development were as foreboding as they were numerous. According to Darbyshire and Associates, they included the following:

- Small amounts of air pollution from coal dust particulates resulting from handling;
- Interruption of wetlands and groundwater drainage;
- Potential degradation of stream water quality if regulations of Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act are violated;
- Biological disruption of the Chuitna River;
- Potential loss of approximately 50% of salmon stock in area if precautionary measures are not taken, according to Alaska Department of Fish and Game;
- Rerouting of creek beds and surface water;
- Displacement of brown bear population;
- Moose will coexist with most mining activity but increased moose kills are expected on the railroad tracks; overall moose population may increase due to increase in pioneering vegetation. (13-14)

Thus, of the eight potential “impacts” listed, only one is advantageous to the Athabascan.

Oil drilling and natural gas operations included similar development scenarios, as interviews with personnel at Diamond-Chuitna, Mobil Oil, and Amex revealed. These included plans for an “industrial enclave such as Prudhoe Bay ... within the Chuitna lease area,” as well as the construction of a “permanent townsite” (7). It included as well the construction of a “transportation corridor” to the proposed “stockpile area and port site.” These plans were similar in their configuration to the infrastructure of the lumber mill, which had been up and running since shortly after the signing of the ANLCS. These corporations even had plans for the development of the mouth of the Chuitna, which was a favorite destination of my walks. On many occasions I had observed families of sea otters playing in its bore tides. A bald eagle pair nested in the crown of an old cottonwood that commanded a view of the wetlands that were home to many species of migratory bird. Imagining an environment that was home to otter, eagle, muskrat, and goose converted into a deepwater port with rails, stockpiles, conveyor belts, and other heavy machinery had a leaden effect on my spirits. The images of wildness contrasted so sharply with the images of this heavy equipment I could scarcely associate both with the same landscape.

If it came to pass, the Athabascan village would be bracketed by the lumber mill to the south and the coal plant to the north, each operating a deepwater port, with its constant output of noise and traffic of cargo ships. What disruptive effect would these operations have on the migratory habits of the salmon, whose species returned to the Chuitna River each summer in a series of four runs beginning in May and lasting until late August? Was the day fast approaching when those returning to the reservation in late August might look down from Jimmy St. Claire’s bush plane and see not a single column of wood-smoke rising
from the huts in which the Athabascans smoked their salmon? And what would be the effect on the local moose population, already dwindling, of all this commercial development? Somber speculations indeed. The facts go on: "2000 people employed during construction of the D-C operation... mining facilities: 500 employees; port facility: 70 employees; maintenance of transportation corridor: 25 employees; camp maintenance: 35 employees" (8).

Development scenarios for oil drilling were just as ominous. These included "30- to 35-foot exploratory holes to be drilled in the next three years" at the Beluga Lake site, "some 55 miles northwest of the village of [Nyotek]" (9). As the study concludes, the result of "both large scale coal and large-scale oil and gas development... would mean a regional population increase to more than 40 times the current population level. This fact alone will make for many changes in village lifestyle" (11). It is difficult to imagine how any of these changes would benefit the Athabascan's subsistence hunting and fishing activities. Darbyshire and Associates' analysis cautions that these figures are the result of a "worst case scenario" in which the "potential negative social, economic, and environmental effects depicted herein would be the result of unrestrained development" (11).

The report then couches most of the anticipated effects in positive terms that are problematic at best. For example, it notes that there would be "more long and short-term local job opportunities for the [Nyotek], while failing to account for the racist hiring practices that habitually deny Native Americans equal opportunity in the job market, whether local or otherwise. The study likewise posits economic changes in a positive light, deploying such signifiers as "growth" and "diversification," as if these are assumed to be good for the Athabascans in and of themselves. The study admits outright that there would be "less emphasis on subsistence economy; more emphasis on cash economy," and quickly passes on to the next point as if this dramatic change was to be easily achieved while ignoring the adverse effects of it: loss of identity, confusion, ambivalence, alienation, nihilism, apathy, alcoholism, drug abuse, and all the other concomitant effects long associated with deracination and acculturation. Thus, the proponents of this development freely admit their activities threaten the traditional Athabascan lifestyle, which is tantamount to admitting such development is a form of cultural genocide.

Again the study reinforces the language and terms of the ANLCS, unwittingly underscoring the collusion between big business and the native corporations. It notes for example the "potential financial benefits to residents accrued from lease of subsurface estate and surface rights-of-way through regional and village Native corporations" (12). It further notes the genocidal impact of this development: "If the majority of new residents are white, [Nyoteks] could be reduced to minority status. Local values, beliefs, customs, traditional authority lines, and group norms could be challenged"—which is indeed the unstated objective of such development.

The relative independence and integrity of the current population is also characterized in negative terms, while loss of that autonomy is signified in
positive language. Development would thus mean “more contact with outsiders; potential loss of isolation.” Once again, signification is deployed as an instrument of cultural imperialism. For the positive word “more” is associated with “contact” with the colonizer, while the negative term “loss” is associated with the native’s “isolation”—another negative term, and the loss of which is implied to be positive and good. The study also notes the potential for increased racial strife, of “intergroup conflicts at work and school” (13), thus resulting in “lower productivity at work and school, due to preoccupation with conflicts.” The study quite freely admits that such development can be expected to have a negative effect on the acquisition of literacy.

In assessing the potential impact of oil and natural gas development, the study makes the following ominous observation:

should a major oil discovery be made at existing exploratory wells ... or should there be a considerable increase in world market demand for natural gas thereby warranting production, it is highly likely that the increased levels of activity will create a considerable impact on [Nyotek] and its residents. (21)

Darbyshire and Associates’ study goes on to forecast the potential impact of oil and natural gas development on the environment, noting that “degradation of the regional and local environment can be expected to accompany oil and gas development in the area.” A number of “accidental occurrences” could have ruinous effects, including the following: “loss of well control, pipeline breaks, tanker accidents, and failure of storage tanks.” In light of the natural disaster inflicted on the entire region by the Exxon Valdez “accident” several years later, these assessments were indeed prescient, underscoring the tendency of potential impacts to become real ones. The study concludes that “in addition to these accidental occurrences, a considerable degree of degradation can be expected as a result of the routine day-to-day operation of the production facilities:

• short term disturbance from the discharge of drilling mud, cuttings, and solid waste;
• long term shoreline alteration;
• soils displacement from dredging and filling;
• flow of water across wetlands blocked by access roads;
• waterfowl nesting areas disrupted by high noise levels;
• potential for contamination of drinking water;
• potential for disruption of essential fish and wildlife reproductive habitat. (22)

Thus, in a grimly ironic twist of conquest, the Athabascans were induced to "sign" their own death warrant. If the ANLCS acted as a birth certificate for the exploitive enterprises of transnational corporatism in these borderlands, it similarly signified the eclipse of the indigenous culture. These legalistic words had a more violent impact on the wilderness of the native than any natural disaster, influx of settlers, or military invasion ever had, insofar as they prepared the way for the invasion of the Athabascan’s homeland by a consortium of
corporations with their skidders, bulldozers, buzz-saws, drilling rigs, and strip-mining equipment—the mechanized arsenal with which the colonialist effects the modern conquest of native lands. Instead of helmets, these New Age neocolonialists wear hardhats, but the genocidal effects of their activities are as violent if not more so. If not “genocide with good intentions,” it is at least genocide with a smile and a handshake.

For the Athabascan, not only “subsistence” but identity itself is inseparable from the land. Therefore, the conflicts that threaten this relationship, that weaken the native’s bond with nature, strike to the very soul of the Athabascan inasmuch as they diminish his or her sense of self, of identity, by cutting off the Athabascan’s identity at its very source. The Athabascan severed from the earth is a disconnected signifier, an empty and vulnerable signifier—a fireweed flower loosed on the wind, severed from the stem rooted in its native soil. Little wonder then that the Athabascans should resist with such violence, the violent impact that drilling rigs and buzz-saws are having on their native lands. Before describing the pedagogical implications of these cultural conflicts, I want to describe the most volatile and contentious of these eco-wars. Although the conflicts over the oil-drilling and coal-mining operations were significant, it was the conflict over the logging operations that became a flashpoint for racial tensions on the reservation and its immediate environs.

The Chugiak Timber Company vs. The Natives of Nyotek

The roads penetrating the seemingly infinite spaces of the Alaskan natives did not end with the Alkan Highway or the North Slope Haul Road. They merely gave way to a network of narrower, unpaved roads that granted the colonizer in general, and loggers in particular, access to the heart of the native’s darkness, even as they deepened that darkness. Like the “superyeoman” who ventured to the ends of the British isles on the great North road of E.M. Forster’s Howard’s End, the loggers of the Chugiak Timber Mill were as industrious and as eager to profit from the native’s homeland as their counterparts employed by Placer Amex Inc., Shell Oil Company, ARCO Alaska, DYCO Petroleum Corporation, Chevron USA, Inc., Alaska Gas Exploration Associates (AGEA), and a host of other transnational corporations whose covetous, colonizing gaze had become fixed upon the lands of the Athabascan as a consequence of the proven reservoirs of natural resources those lands contained. The entire region was on the verge of an economic explosion, of yet another “boom” that made the lips of those anxious to profit from it salivate in anticipation of the quick and enormous cash windfalls to be gained. It was merely the latest in a series of “booms” that have characterized the history of Alaska and impacted the subsistence lifeways of its native peoples, who if not the least, were often the last to benefit from these “booms.” Booms in fur, gold, and oil had triggered great influxes of settlers and prospectors into native lands. Now, by virtue of the seemingly boundless treasures in natural resources “discovered” on their lands, the Athabascans of Nyotek were about to experience another such boom. And unlike their native
counterparts of the past, they wanted, were even demanding, a voice in the process. The tribal council thus commissioned Darbyshire and Associates to conduct an environmental impact study (1981), to analyze the effects of these proposed commercial enterprises on the native's natural habitat. The findings of Darbyshire and Associates relative to the operations of the Chugiak Timber Mill are significant:

[Chugiak Timber Mills, Inc.] has run a logging operation and a chip mill in [Nyotek] for 7 years. In addition to the areas covered by the plant, the dock, and the camp, the company's timber sales cover 275,000 acres. According to [Jim Douglas], Senior Vice President, Chugiak Timber Mills has no plans for any type of expansion of operations in or near [Nyotek]. The company anticipates continued operation at the same level indefinitely. At present the mill employs between 50 and 75 persons on a year round basis. [Douglas] stated that, as always, the company is interested in hiring local people. (27)

Darbyshire and Associate's assessment is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, it contains several claims that are problematic at best. For example, the assertion that Chugiak Timber Mills has no plans "for any type of expansion" is called into question by a statement in the preceding paragraph which informs us that "The Alaska Department of Natural Resources will conduct a bid-sale for 5-year timber rights on 48,000 acres located just east of the Chuitna coal fields and north of the Nyotek Native Corporation Lands" (27). This is precisely the sort of expansion that sparked the concerns of the Nyotek natives, and prompted them to commission the environmental impact study in the first place. The announcement of this sale of lands for timber harvesting would seem to directly contradict the reassurances of the Senior Vice President that the lumber mill had no plans "for any type of expansion of operations in or near Nyotek."

Signification underscores the disparity between assertions and reality in other areas of Darbyshire and Associates "study." They permit the Senior Vice President of the logging mill to offer the native another assurance, which if not false, was at least questionable: the assurance that, "as always, the company is interested in hiring local people" (27). As the Athabascans would assert, however, that while Chugiak Timber Co. may be "interested" in hiring them, it rarely did. Given the large population of available Athabascan males, enough to more than meet the demands for a labor pool of 50-75 workers, why were never more than a handful ever employed by the mill? Why, the Athabascans asked, does the mill prefer to fly in white workers from Anchorage when there is a ready pool of unemployed Athabascan workers not four miles away? The Nyotek Athabascans had long complained of the lumber mill's racist hiring practices. Yet, their grievances were compromised by yet another example of the peculiar intimacy that typifies colonizer-colonized relations: the mill had constructed for free a series of redwood homes in the village to offset the needs of its growing population for affordable housing. Thus, a part of the village took on the aspect of a quiet, affluent cul-de-sac in suburban American. Yet even in this, the superyeomen of the lumber mills took on the visage of gift-bearing Greeks, for
the new homes the natives inhabited accelerated the erosion of the very subsistence lifestyle they were fighting to preserve by enmeshing them even deeper in the lifestyle of their colonizers, to say nothing of deepening their debt of gratitude to the lumber mill. With this single act, the Chugiak Lumber Mill defused the insurrectionist attitudes of many Athabascans, driving those feelings underground. The repression of these animosities, however, only enervated them, assuring that their inevitable eruption would only be the more violent, for as Arnold Krupat observes, "there is always a return of the repressed in one form or another" (3).

Adding fuel to these simmering racial animosities was the fact that the logging activities were also degrading the local moose populations upon which the Athabascan's subsistence lifestyle depended. The situation was characterized by a sardonic irony: it is true that the logging operations actually created ideal browsing habitat for the moose; however, the giant ungulates were attracted to these areas in such numbers they became easy targets for the loggers, who began going to work armed not only with buzz-saws but with 30.06s. Consequently, these areas became "kill zones" not only for the fir trees but for these fur-bearing giants (a single one of which, when "dressed out," yielded four hundred pounds of meat: enough to feed an extended Athabascan family for a year).  

Emotions over the situation were raw, simmering at or near the surface. For many Athabascans the loss of this source of meat, and the subsistence lifestyle dependent upon it, was not worth the modern, western-style homes they had gained—feelings that were exacerbated by the allegedly racist hiring practices of the mill that denied them the opportunity to offset this loss through gainful employment. Not only was the lumber mill taking money out of their pockets, but meat off of their tables. To this segment of the Athabascan population, the advantages of the lumber mill were far outweighed by the disadvantages. Their feelings were further exacerbated by the fact the mill was under no obligation to "reclaim" the forests it had logged. The impending sale of adjacent lands for logging further alarmed them, for instead of eradicating or even containing at current levels these logging operations, they were now faced with the potential expansion of logging activities, despite the Senior Vice President's assurances to the contrary. Like their counterparts in the lower forty-eight, they had been lied to one too many times to have any confidence in those assurances—indeed took them as proof that their own worst fears were warranted. Another aspect of the lumber mill's operations rubbed more salt in the Athabascan's wounds: the mill was situated on the same hallowed ground as the Athabascan's ancestral village. The tsunamis generated by the epic quake of 1964 had forced the relocation of that village to safer and higher ground: the bluffs four miles to the north that marked its present location. In this pre-ANLCS period, the Athabascans could not have foreseen that this historical site would in a few short years be occupied by their colonizers: a galling and intolerable affront to their heritage.

For these reasons then, the Athabascans felt increasingly resentful of the lumber mill and its employees, many of whom bussed their children to the
reservation school. It was a volatile situation, lacking only a spark to ignite it. The sad irony is that the desire to protect their ancestral ways, which depended upon subsistence hunting and fishing, is what induced the Athabascans to sign the ANLCS in the first place. However, once profit-taking and not subsistence became the prime motive for the native corporation, the pressure to abandon the traditional, non-profitable subsistence lifestyle and to "develop the wilderness" instead was intensified. In the last analysis, the dominant culture got the Athabascans themselves to do what they had been unable to do: sign a "settlement" that required them to eradicate their own subsistence lifestyle in order to receive payment for the lands they sold. The ANLCS is a monument to the insidious ingenuity of the colonizer’s signifying practices, as embodied in the treaty-making documents that have for centuries been deployed to wrest "title" of native lands away from the native. As Mander writes,

profit, growth, expansion, and conversion of natural resources to dollar-producing income were now the managers’ driving motives. It was quickly obvious to the new class of native business people that traditional subsistence activity would not turn a profit—unlike cutting down forests, mining for minerals, drilling for oil... and promoting high impact tourism. (293)

The legacies of the ANLCS are as notorious as they are numerous. It not only ended native title to the land, but seriously threatened indigenous subsistence lifestyles, increased the welfare dependency of the native population, intensified the frictions between native peoples, subverted indigenous structures of government, undermined the autonomy of native peoples, and opened the door to rampant commercial exploitation of the resources on native lands by transnational corporations, which are among "the most economically voracious organizations in the world" (294). Argues Mander, "ANLCS has affected everything: family relations, traditional patterns of leadership and decision making, customs of sharing... the entire native way of life. The village has lost its political and social autonomy" (295).

The neocolonial institutions of the transnational corporation and the borderland school have had a far more debilitating impact on the Athabascan subculture than the more overtly colonizing activities of the militarist and the missionary. Observes Paul Ongtooguk, "now, when they are coming in after the land they come not with soldiers, but with people carrying briefcases" (qtd. in Mander 294) as part of an attempt to "re-create Main Street on the tundra" (296). Consequently, what is being effaced in the borderlands of Alaska is not only the ability to be different, but the right to be different. Speaking on behalf of the Yupik Eskimo leaders, Art Davison underscores the Other’s desire to remain as such: "Please try to fathom our great desire to survive in a way somewhat different from yours" (qtd. in Mander 297). Mander reinforces the assertion that one of the arenas of bicultural conflict stems from the native’s desire to remain native: "it is their profound desire to be themselves, to be true to their own values, that has led to the present confrontation" (302).
Yet the Indian’s attempt to be Indian threatens the hegemony of the colonizer, intensifying efforts to eradicate Indianness. The very act of self-assertion is itself an insurrection against the assimilationist aims of the colonizer. For the Other, identity and insurrection are inseparable: I am, therefore I am subversive. Further, without “title” to their land, the Athabascans cannot be themselves insofar as indigenous identity is inseparable from the land. Thus, any attempt to reassert themselves as natives is inevitably yoked to reestablishing their autonomy over the land—a struggle that brings them into direct conflict with the interests of the transnational corporations.

Thus, the landscape itself is the site of a violent contest between the mutually opposed interests of these two parties—it remains the prize to be possessed in this violent, bicultural tug-of-war. On the one hand, Glacier Amex, Chevron USA, and Chugiak Timber working through the Nyotek Native Corporation, are seeking to establish their “title” to land; on the other, the Nyotek tribal council is seeking to “reestablish tribal control over the land,” as well as the autonomy of tribal forms of government and the preservation of ancestral lifeways (300). For the Alaska native, wealth and profit are defined in terms of a holistic relationship to the earth that foregrounds a subsistence, as opposed to a, cash-based, lifestyle. Argues Antoinette Helmer of Craig, Alaska, “profit to natives means a good life derived from the land and sea. . . . This land we hold in trust is our wealth. It is the only wealth we could possibly pass on to our children. . . . Without our homelands we become true paupers” (qtd. in Mander 301).

Words in the Wilderness: Praxis Takes to the Woods
To be not only relevant but ethical in such a milieu, pedagogy must somehow seek for ways to foreground the native’s landscape and the conflicts immanent in it, not only as a vehicle for a more active residency in the borderlands, but as a means for overcoming the debilitating effects of bicultural alienation through reconnection to an ancestral topos. Further, composition instruction foregrounding the local cultural conflicts could not only reinforce instruction in borderland narratives, but in a writing across-the-curriculum, and Foxfire project as well, privileging the acquisition of critical, as well as academic literacy. In the search for the “pedagogical arts of [this] contact zone,” I had to look no further than the local cultural conflicts associated with the environment and with schooling (Pratt 40). These too became the “alter/native” texts to be read and written, the “generative themes” which help native students not only “unveil” their colonized world, but intervene to alter it.

What then are the pedagogical implications of these local cultural conflicts? What are the constructive uses of cultural conflict in the composition classroom? How might the conflicts immanent in the environment and in schooling be used in the composition classroom as vehicles of academic and critical literacy? How might the acquisition of these literacies be yoked to native resistance struggle, as part of an effort to make learning in the borderlands more meaningful to these marginalized students, to make the borderland residency of such students more
participatory and their futures more liveable? If one of the goals of resistance pedagogy is to orient instruction, not to the lived reality of the colonizer, but to the experiential base of the colonized, then do not these local cultural conflicts comprise a facet of that experience that warrants inquiry? Can not these conflicts, in short, be posed as a series of problems to native students to be studied, analyzed, read, debated, and written about, as a preliminary means of solving them? Could not the inquiry we had launched into the conflicted contact zone of the Inuit and the Lakota, as embodied in the borderland narratives of Black Elk, Lame Deer, and Farley Mowat serve as a springboard for an inquiry into the Athabascan’s own environmental contact zone, and the conflicts associated with it?

Before elaborating this model for conflict-oriented pedagogy, however, I want to offer a qualification: I am not merely writing of my borderland experiences of yesteryear, but of the possibilities I see for enriching literacy practices in general, and borderland pedagogy in particular, in the future. My aim, therefore, is not merely descriptive but illustrative. My purpose here is not merely to describe the constructive uses to which these local conflicts were put in the classroom, but too illustrate as well the pedagogical possibilities for foregrounding cultural conflict as a vehicle for the acquisition of literacy, critical as well as academic, and for a more participatory residency in the borderlands. With regard to the pedagogical possibilities enunciated here, I share James Berlin’s hope “that teachers will find in them suggestions for developing course materials and activities appropriate to their own situations” (115).

One implication of these eco wars was the effect they had on the group dynamics of my classes. An inquiry foregrounding cross-cultural conflicts has the potential to become contentious in the extreme, especially in a classroom comprised not only of Athabascan students who lived on the reservation, but of white students who lived in the timber camp, and whose fathers worked as loggers, roustabouts, and foremen at the mill, the oil rig, and the hydroelectric plant. Further, virtually every student, Athabascan as well as white, female as well as male, had participated in family moose hunts as part of a lifestyle that was a hybrid between subsistence and cash-based practices. Many of the boys and a few of the girls were good shots with a rifle and had “taken” their own moose. All were knowledgeable in the intricacies of the moose hunt; and most held strong opinions on the politics of moose-hunting which divided almost exclusively along racial lines. Many shared the attitudes of their parents regarding the viewpoints enunciated by the other side. Thus, these eco wars served to reinforce the racial divisions of the timber-camp/reservation community, transforming the classroom into a microcosm of that community.

These environmental conflicts, however, affected much more than the group dynamics in the classroom. They provided the “alter/native” texts for a Freirean approach to borderland pedagogy—one that afforded students of both races the opportunity to “read” these conflicts and then write about them, to read and write their own world as a means not only of naming, but of transforming it.
Such an inquiry into the causes and effects of local cultural conflicts foregrounds a variety of pedagogical goals, including a heightened awareness of the roles that signification, representation, textuality, and language-use in general play in the oppression of one culture by another. Mastering the signifying practices of their colonizers, as embodied in “texts” such as the ANLCS and the environmental impact study of Darbyshire and Associates, might enable the Athabascan to avoid being victimized by them. By learning to read between the lines of those texts they might avoid being captured by them; by “reading” the white spaces in between the colonizer’s words, they might maintain their own “space,” might more effectively resist the colonizer’s intrusions into that space—intrusions that are habitually initiated with the Word, that is through signification, though the language of negotiation that disguises disadvantages as advantages, theft as trade, conquest as autonomy, and a “rip-off” of the land as “title” to it—negotiations that accelerate the Other’s slide down the slippery slope of signification, a descent which ends with the catastrophic closure of cultural genocide. A pedagogy foregrounding cultural conflicts, and particularly environmental conflicts, might encourage native students to play a more active role in the preservation of their homeland and their traditional lifeways, and in the resistance struggle their people are waging to achieve those ends. Analysis of cultural conflicts within the classroom could challenge students to become more involved in efforts to resolve those conflicts beyond the classroom.

Further, if students could be made aware of the adverse affects upon the environment of logging, coal-mining, and oil-drilling activities, then their future complicity in these activities might be modified, or at least made contingent upon a commitment by corporations to “reclaim” these lands. As a result of such an inquiry, their future participation in such activities might not be so easily divorced from ethical concerns arising from the negative impact these activities have on moose populations, on salmon migrations, and hence on the indigenous peoples who depend upon these for their subsistence. Environmental corporatism is not necessarily incompatible with the subsistence needs of the Athabascan; it is only incompatible with those needs if its practices takes no account of them.

In this section I would like to articulate some of the possibilities for the constructive use of cultural conflicts in the composition classroom. Following Freire’s cue, these environmental conflicts could be posed to students as a series of problems not just to be studied, investigated, debated, and written about within the classroom, but to be acted upon and resolved beyond it. What possibilities does such a focus present for the practitioner, in the borderlands and elsewhere?

As part of an on-going focus on the signifying practices of the colonizer that have historically oppressed the Native American in general, and the Athabascan in particular, the ANLCS could be revisited. The signifying practices embodied in this “settlement” could be interrogated within the context of an historical inquiry into the signifying practices extant in other treaties between the U.S. government and Native Americans. A series of critical questions could be posed.
to students linking this text to recent Athabascan history, and positioning both within the broader historical context of colonization through treaty-making: Should the ANLCS have been signed by Athabascans? Should it have been signed by all Athabascans? What were the advantages and disadvantages of signing it? Do the disadvantages outweigh the advantages? What are the negative legacies of it? Does it pose a threat to the subsistence lifeways of the Athabascan, and if so how? Should Athabascans seek its repeal, and if so how might this goal be achieved? Should the Athabascans have surrendered separate nation status conferred by the designation of “Reservation”? Should they have accepted corporate status? What are the legal, political, cultural, and ethical implications of this shift in signification from reservation to corporation? What are its implications for the construction of Athabascan identity? How does the ANLCS reinscribe other treaties “signed” by other Native American peoples in other places and in other times? Does it reinscribe a history of colonization dating back five hundred years, and if so how? Were Congress and big business guilty of collusion in the ANLCS for the purposes of colonization?

These questions could drive a semester long inquiry into the origins and legacies of the ANLCS that could not only be linked to instruction in American history, but which could dialogically reinforce instruction in a WAC/Foxfire program and a reading project foregrounding non-canonical, alter/native narratives from the borderlands. Students in the Foxfire publication class, for example, could be dispatched into the local community to document the attitudes of Athabascans concerning the ANLCS, adding a contemporary chapter to a Foxfire publication that heretofore privileged the recuperation of the “authentic,” “orthodox” Athabascan to the exclusion of all others. A pedagogy foregrounding local cultural conflicts could not only be linked to Foxfire pedagogy, but could reconfigure it in significant and useful ways: appropriating it as a vehicle for critical, as well as academic literacy, for the recovery of contemporary as well as traditional Athabascans culture, and for participatory as well as literate residency in the borderlands.

Such a conflict-oriented pedagogy could also dialogically reinforce instruction in the reading and writing class. The ANLCS could be reread as a text that reinscribes the colonizing effects of the realist novel, reinforcing subversive readings of London’s Call, Forster’s Howard’s End, and Conrad’s Darkness—as part of a broader indictment of the signifying practices the colonizer deploys to justify the theft of native lands; an inquiry into the role of representation that would extend from the aesthetic to the political realm. Indeed, Berlin argues that an inquiry into the signifying practices of the dominant culture comprises a central focus of social epistemic pedagogy: “Social-epistemic rhetoric is the study and critique of signifying practices in their relation to subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions” (77)—to which I would add the category of the aesthetic. A praxis foregrounding cross-cultural conflict would be remiss if it did not include an inquiry into the signifying practices that characterize the colonizer-colonized relationship, as
Berlin asserts: “signifying practices are always at the center of conflict and contention” (82). As Friend asserts, a critique of the dominant culture that challenges students to engage structures of domination both within and beyond the classroom, that privileges diversity, dialogue, and opposition—even to one’s own pedagogy—is the most ethical move practitioners can make in the postmodern writing classroom (549).

Further, this inquiry into the signifying practices and negative legacies of the ANLCS could be linked to a broader inquiry into the conflicts associated with the environment. Again, a series of problem-posing questions related to coal-mining, oil-drilling, natural gas exploration, and logging would drive such an inquiry: should the corporations that engage in these activities be required by law to “reclaim” the land? Does logging have an adverse impact on local moose populations? Does it pose a threat to native subsistence hunting? What should be done to curb or eliminate this threat? Should loggers be prohibited from hunting moose on lands the Athabascan sold to the logging company; should they be prevented from killing moose in the areas they log? What legal rights do non-natives have on native lands? Does the Constitution of the United States apply on an Indian Reservation? Do the normal guarantees of freedom apply to non-natives? Should whites in other words be free to hunt, fish, and trap on native lands? Is the Athabascan’s attempt to prohibit these activities a form of reverse discrimination? Are the hiring practices of the Chugiak Timber Co. discriminatory, as has been alleged? Should the Chugiak Timber Co. be obligated to hire more natives, all natives, or a certain percentage of natives? What is wrong with logging practices as they are currently conducted on lands adjacent to the reservation? And what should be done to eliminate these “wrongs?” How have the Athabascans benefitted from logging activities? Do these benefits offset the adverse environmental, social, and economic impacts of logging? Should the timber camp be relocated to less politicized terrain? Do the Athabascans have a legal or ethical right to insist on such a relocation?

A series of similar questions could drive inquiries into the proposed development of the Beluga coal fields, offshore oil deposits, and natural gas reservoirs. Moreover, these inquiries could be linked to a number of critical writing activities. In the pre-writing phases, students could be given the opportunity to discover their own voices on these issues through a series of directed free-writes in journals. They could be asked to conduct semester-long inquiries into one or more of these issues. As part of this inquiry, they could be required to interview adults in both the reservation and timber camp communities, and these interviews could comprise yet another chapter in the Foxfire publication foregrounding contemporary aspects of Athabascan existence. They could likewise be required to devise an action plan for resolving the problem or conflict, and to initiate steps to implement that action plan? Students could be grouped in small collaborative teams or pairs to conduct phases of the inquiry, to write up the results. Questions generated by this inquiry could become the subject of small group discussions or broader classroom debates, in a further
effort to help students come into voice on a particular "theme." In a further effort to develop their own critical voices students could be asked to keep a writing and reading response journal in which they recorded their own evolving attitudes on a given issue.

Thus, the recovery of local cultural conflicts could be associated with every phases of the writing process, from pre-writing and research to revision and final edit, from independent to collaborative writing endeavors, coupling the process of signification to the process of liberation, the process of representation to the process of resistance; conjoining the projects of literacy and freedom, of writing and the work of combating cultural genocide, of reading and reconnection to an ancestral topos (and to an indigenous Self that is inseparable from it); a pedagogy which resituates the word in the world, restoring the indigenous link between them; a pedagogy which nativizes the borderland curriculum and which politicizes the practice of literacy. Ethics in the writing classroom, and particularly in the borderland classroom, must first become political to become humane. It must become, as Friend asserts, an "ethics of doing"—and the first thing it must do is assure the equal distribution, not of goods, but of agency, through the transference, not of knowledge, but of the right to "name their own world" (as opposed to naming the colonizer's version of the colonizer's world).

Members from the community, Athabascan as well as white, representing the views of opposing sides could similarly be invited into the classroom as part of the inquiry: loggers as well as native moose hunters, the foreman of the lumber mill as well as the president of the tribal council. When students had reached a level of mastery relative to an issue they could be given the opportunity for disseminating that knowledge to their peers in the form of oral presentations, could be allowed to model the role of an arguer, of a public intellectual, of a civic-minded citizen, of a knower and a knowledge-maker, as a means of preparing for presentations in more public forums: town hall meetings, tribal council meetings, school board meetings, environmental impact hearings, land lease sales hearings, commencement addresses etc. Since these are the topoi in which the genocide of their culture is being enacted, it is critical that the Athabascan come into voice at these sites, in the genocidal tongue of their oppressors. This may not be the only purpose for mastering the discursive codes of the dominant culture, but it is certainly one of the most essential for resisting extinction. This comprises a bittersweet irony for the Athabascan: it is necessary to assimilate to a degree the ways of the dominate culture in order to avoid extinction through assimilation. These public forums, not the composition classroom, are the necessary destination of critical inquiry and the agonistic discourses that evolve from it. Students can be allowed to model the role of public intellectual in the classroom as a prelude to assuming that role in reality, in the community at large, thereby entering and shaping the public conversation being waged over these conflicts. The native as public intellectual and activist does not constitute a "cop out" or "sell-out," is not a "sign" of accommodation; rather, he or she constitutes the logical destination, the incarnation and personification of an ethics of "doing."
A more live-action approach to the acquisition of critical literacy could be adopted, as well—one which allows students to model the roles of those engaged in these debates: of School Board member or Tribal Council President, concerned parent or Athabascan resident, logger or native moose hunter, sports recreationist or Fish and Game board member, Senior Vice President of Chugiak Timber or Nyotek Native Corporation board member, game warden or Athabascan poacher, modeling the discourses associated with these diverse viewpoints at a mock press conference, a public hearing, a courtroom trial, or a school board meeting—any number of reincarnations of the writing-classroom-as-public-forum. These role-playing activities could be expected to empower students’ public presentations insofar as they would allow the students to challenge, defend, rebut, refine, and develop their viewpoints in classroom debate. The classroom could thus be transformed into a “contact zone” of persuasive discourses, where the diverse opinions of potential rhetoricians are brought into “contact” with one another. As Michael Cain states,

stage the debate itself, involve the students in it, and represent the polarized positions along with any that fall between. Expose students to what their elders are squabbling about, and empower them to grasp and articulate why these issues matter so they can gauge where they stand themselves. (“Teaching” xix-xx)

Cain’s views are similar to those articulated by Min-Zhan Lu in “Writing as Repositioning,” in which she advocates a pedagogy that enables students to “reposition” themselves relative to a heteroglossia of discourses, as opposed to being the passive objects to which knowledge is transmitted as part of a unitary, teacherly discourse. Graff theorizes a similar position foregrounding the constructive uses of conflict:

So let’s instead seize upon the conflicts that separate us and define them as issues that we can explore with one another and with students. Let’s make the institution a place for serious learning and for political self-consciousness without insisting that it become single-mindedly politicized, captive to a single ideology. (124-27)

Instead of screening students from these local cultural conflicts, instead of sheltering them from the legacy of oppression, we should evolve pedagogical arts of the contact zone that enable them to directly confront that which oppresses. As Cain argues, teachers need to “imagine how we can profitably make education coherent through foregrounding conflict and empowering it as a principle” (xxxii). These activities could also be expected to foster a stronger sense of voice, purpose, and audience in their writing. Letters addressed to editors of metropolitan papers, speeches addressed to members of the tribal council or school board, petitions addressed to the principal, all might function as a more action-oriented complement to the consciousness-raising, “reflective” component of Freirean pedagogy.

This is why it is paramount that the “unveiling” of the indigene’s world through analysis be followed by the alteration of that world through action. In the final analysis, literacy must become resistance, or it withers on its intellectual
Vine for want of any useful role to play in the Other's conflicted existence, for want of any relevance to his or her lived reality, for want of the stimulus of activity. Like any appendage that has no use, it atrophies for want of exercise in an apolitical climate.

**Toward an Ethics of Doing**

Instead of being used only as an exit, the door that leads from the composition classroom must be used instead as a threshold into the conflicted topoi of the contact zone where resistance is already being waged. Instead of being viewed as a door that closes off academic conversations, it should be viewed as a threshold for extending that conversation into those other, non-academic sites where cultural conflicts are being contested. Ultimately, analysis must acquire legs, must get off its sedentary, intellectual behind and onto its recolonizing feet, must introduce the world at large to its wild native tongue if it is to stand any chance of recolonizing the world with the word. In the bicultural contact zone, literacy that does not lead to resistance is merely another form of non-existence.

What actions then are available to the borderland student seeking to devise an action plan for resolving these cultural conflicts? When converted to resistance, what forms might such critical literacy assume? The first phase could involve organization on the local level, beginning at the school and expanding outward to include the community. To this end, students could form a society of their peers whose stated mission is the preservation of ancestral lifeways and the environmental habitats upon which they depend—a society whose purpose is the responsible development of the land and the productive coexistence of the Athabascan and the transnational corporation. They could recruit members throughout the school and the community. They could sponsor consciousness raising activities, elect officers, dispense flyers, circulate petitions, call for public meetings, address the tribal council and the policy makers of the Chugiak Lumber Mill, write letters to the editors of metropolitan papers, stage protests as media events against environmental degradations, expand membership to include adults from the community. They could call for town meetings in which Athabascans could confront the corporate hierarchy of the Lumber Mill with their concerns over the impact of logging on subsistence moose hunting activities. They could form a bridge of activism and consciousness raising with the tribal council, joining its effort to resist the incursions of the colonizer. They could seek to engage the corporate echelons of Glacer Amex, Chevron USA, and Simasko Corp. in similar public dialogue, seeking guarantees of environmental reclamation, for employment, and for safe-guards against environmental degradations that negatively impact their subsistence fishing and hunting activities. They could run for political office, on the local, regional, or state level. They could invite speakers already invested in the struggle to preserve the environment, to act as consultants sharing their knowledge of tactics and grass roots organization, with a proven history for waging similar resistance in other places: in the redwood forests of Northern California, in the wetlands of Florida, in the
coastal communities of California where offshore drilling is degrading the environment, on the open seas where fisheries are being depleted through gill-netting.

In short, they could become involved in the local conflicts over the environment that are having such a drastic impact on their subsistence lifeways and the viability of those lifeways in the future.

The conflicted topoi of the lumber mill, the logging road and the clear-cut forest, of the coal field and the oil rig could be picketed with placards expressing their concerns. Metropolitan media could be contacted to give coverage to such activities. Corporate offices in Anchorage could become the site of similar activities. Symbolic activities depicting the degradation of the Athabascan’s homeland could be “staged” for the media as part of these activities—events involving role-playing and costumes, satire, parody, and song. Public hearings could be held in Anchorage as well, in an effort to recruit others to their cause, natives as well as white.

Once solidarity had been generated on the local level, it could be pursued on the regional and state level. A systematic campaign to form an alliance of Alaskan natives against the encroachments of transnational corporations could be initiated by phone, by mail, and by e-mail, in an effort to extend the debate from the localized community of the Nyotek Athabascan to a much broader political and cultural arena, in an effort to broaden their base of support, to widen their stance so that it not only encompassed the ground under their feet, but the lands of all Alaskan natives.

Such solidarity is a critical step to the long-term health and prospects of such a movement. One of the critical strategies the colonizer deploys to perpetuate the subjugation of the Other is to fragment the native population and then deal with their resistance piecemeal, thus minimizing resistance by localizing it. The native must recognize and resist this tendency of the colonizer to confine resistance to the local level. The ANLCS affords abundant evidence of this strategy of subjugation inasmuch as it divided Alaska’s native population into fourteen regions, each with its own “corporation,” each of which was then recognized by the colonizer as the representative or spokesperson for the peoples of that region. Freire’s observations are to the point:

It is in the interest of the oppressor to weaken the oppressed still further, to isolate them, to create and deepen rifts among them. This is done by varied means, from the repressive methods of the government bureaucracy to the forms of cultural action with which they manipulate the people by giving them the impression that they are being helped. The more a region or area is broken down into “local communities” . . . the more alienation is intensified. And the more alienated people are, the easier it is to divide them and keep them divided. These focalized forms of action . . . (especially in rural areas), hamper the oppressed from perceiving reality critically and keep them isolated from the problems of oppressed men in other areas. (137-38)

The strategy of designating a corporate board to represent the native population of a region underscores Freire’s observation that “the oppressors do not favor promoting the community as a whole, but rather selected leaders”: 

Composing the Eco Wars 237
the latter state, by preserving a state of alienation, hinders the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in a total reality. In addition, the dominators try to present themselves as saviors of the men they dehumanize and divide. This messianism, however, cannot conceal their true intentions: to save themselves. They want to save their riches, their power, their way of life: the things that enable them to subjugate others. (142)

This is why the organization of the people is a first critical step away from subjugation—a step which the colonizer fears almost as much as the native’s open insurrection, for it weakens the colonizer’s position, destabilizes it insofar as the colonizer’s control of the Other no longer tends toward totalization. Argues Freire, “in the dialogical theory of action, the organization of the people presents the antagonistic opposite of this manipulation” (176).

Therefore, to be truly dialogic pedagogy must not only integrate instruction across the borderland curriculum, it must integrate analysis and action, rhetoric and resistance, consciousness and conflict, pedagogy and politics, instruction and insurrection. One form this activism can therefore take is organization—on the local, regional, state, national, and even international level. For example, the Athabascans’ quest for agency could be juxtaposed with an analysis of the Hawaiian’s quest for sovereignty. Thus, the effort to organize on the local level of the school—by forming “clubs” or “societies” that actively seek the preservation of the Athabascan’s subculture and local environment, by building bridges to other organizations in the Athabascan community, such as the tribal council—could serve to stimulate organization on a broader scale, between Nyotek and other Athabascan villages, between the Athabascans and the Aleuts and the Eskimo, between the native peoples of Alaska and the Inuit of Canada, and between these native peoples and their cousins in the lower forty-eight and Hawaii.

The borderland school, or at the very least, some of the classrooms within it, can provide some of the infrastructure for the native’s liberatory struggle. Historically, these schools have functioned “within the structures of domination . . . as agencies which prepare the invaders of the future” (Freire 45). Let them help prepare instead the liberators of the indigenous landscape. In freeing their native earth, they are freeing themselves to emerge from it—and what emerges will be a radical, new red subjectivity, rooted to its native soil, saying its own Word in a native tongue, mingling its voice to that of a loon laughing on an unnamed lake, of the wind soughing through the shifting leaves of an Athabascan autumn, each a shield of light raised to the sun: unfettered, unfallen, and unquiet.

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Notes
1 For a fuller discussion of the racial conflicts associated with moose hunting, see Brown in works cited.
2 See Brown in works cited for a more detailed discussion of the practical and ethical implications of adapting Foxfire pedagogy to this borderland milieu.
3 See Brown for a fuller treatment of the pedagogical possibilities for using alter/native narratives in the borderlands.

Works Cited
——. "Other Voices, Other Rooms: Organizing and Teaching the Humanities Conflicts." In Cain, 17-44.