

LET THEM BE HEARD:
BRINGING NATIVE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE CLOSER IN TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Teaching about Native Americans, especially as a non-Native person, involves a number of complications. The experience and histories of Indigenous peoples have often been presented from the point of view of the Euroamerican hegemonic power and complicated by a long pattern of colonization, including education. As a result, Native peoples themselves as well as outsiders have been mostly exposed to the dominant culture's perspectives of Native Americans, often being stereotyped and reductive. The aim of the present paper is to examine the theoretical frameworks advanced by American Indian scholars and educators who demonstrate the methods which expose colonization and show the fundamental Native concepts needed to be involved in the pedagogies concerning Indigenous people. The primary consideration is to be guided by Native peoples' own concepts in trying to avoid perpetuating the colonizing pattern. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (a Lumbee scholar and educator) advanced the Tribal Critical Race Theory, which offers a comprehensive framework which can provide useful guidelines for teaching about Native Americans. The paper also offers suggestions for implementing this framework in the classroom such as using contemporary Native American autobiographical writing, involving the concept of performance or digital resources like those developed by Craig Howe, an Oglala Sioux, and the Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies. Exposing students to Native people through Indigenous people's own stories and resources may be helpful in presenting them as real people. Such an approach may help students to be able to hear and access Native peoples' own voices sharing their lives, which can contribute to bringing their experience closer to students.

Keywords: Native American; American Indian; Indigenous; Tribal Critical Race Theory; Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy; Craig Howe; autobiography; colonization.

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1. Preliminaries¹

The context of the treatment and perception of Native peoples in America is marked by an array of problems including erroneous assumptions, exploitation, or ignorance, historically marred by conquest, colonization, removal, forced assimilation, and cultural genocide. Native Americans and their cultures still remain largely unacknowledged, unaddressed, and/or invisible. Indigenous people either do not exist in the consciousness of many Americans as real, contemporary people, or if they do, they are stereotyped, appearing mainly as cartoonish characters, mascots, noble savages at best. The images of Native Americans as mascots and the names of sports teams such as Black Hawks or Redskins remain widespread. Despite the protests of Indigenous groups, pointing to how racist, insulting, and insensitive such acts are, the general public, mainstream American society largely ignores them. Sherman Alexie (a Spokane Indian writer) ascribes this situation to the lack of cultural power of American Indians in the United States (Alexie 2013). Absence, underrepresentation, and misrepresentation each can be disturbing and harmful. Some authors have called or pleaded for some recognition, some acknowledgment of their cultures. Alexie expressed a view, uncomfortable for many Americans, pointing out a parallel between the Holocaust and what he sees as the genocide of Native peoples. Alexie shares his frustration over “[t]he arrogance of this country to have a Holocaust museum, to point out the genocidal sins of another culture is amazing” (Campbell 2003). In his poem he writes:

We are the great-grandchildren of Sand Creek and Wounded Knee.
We are the veterans of the Indian wars. We are the sons
and daughters of the walking dead. We have lost everyone.
What do we indigenous people want from our country?
We stand over mass graves. Our collective grief makes us numb.
(Alexie 1996: 119, quoted in Peterson 2010: 74)

Having experienced colonialism, Indigenous people, understandably, have had an ambivalent, skeptical or negative attitude to mainstream education. Non-Native people have been exposed to mainstream, stereotyped and colonizing views of Indigenous peoples as well. Therefore, it is important to apply methods in teaching that would give priority to Native perspectives, including those regarding education, thus avoiding further colonization. Some Indigenous scholars and educators express the need for this approach quite strongly. Haynes Writer (a

¹ This article focuses primarily on the Indigenous peoples in the United States and terms such as Native American, American Indian, Native, and Indigenous are used interchangeably to refer to the original inhabitants of what is now the United States. I followed the conventions used in the sources I have consulted, for example, Brayboy et al. (2015: 9).

Tsalagi – Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma) cites the view that “if inclusion is not being done by us or from our frame of reference, leave Indigenous Peoples out of the discourse and curriculum content; otherwise colonization and oppression are perpetuated” (Haynes Writer 2008: 2). To avoid this, those who teach about Native peoples need to turn their attentive ears to let them speak for themselves.

2. Context

The underlying assumptions and the pattern of colonization which shaped the situation of Indigenous peoples in America were already established with Columbus’s arrival and first contact, further continued by Puritan settlers and their leaders, through the philosophy of John Locke in England, and the further implementation of colonialism by the United States government. When Christopher Columbus wrote of Native people that “no one refuses the asker anything that he possesses” and that they “bartered cotton and gold like beasts” (Columbus 2012 [1493]), he perceived this as an opportunity to exploit these people with the agenda in mind that after their conversion they would contribute to the greater wealth of the colonizing power, concluding his letter with “let us be glad not only for the exaltation of our faith, but also for the increase of temporal prosperity” (Columbus 2012 [1493]: 5). Columbus’s attitude was part of the Doctrine of Discovery, which as Deloria (1992: 33) explains, was “a pillar of emerging international law that stated that that a Christian monarch could claim the legal title to lands that his subjects discovered if these lands were unoccupied or if they were occupied by non-Christian peoples”.

This established pattern continued in the English world where among Puritans Captain John Smith repeatedly referred to the native people as “savages” (Smith 2007 [1624]). The colonizing power found the justification for their conquest in the philosophy of John Locke. Robert A. Williams, an American Indian legal scholar and activist, who has extensively studied the legal documents addressing Indian issues, argues that Locke’s ideas from *Second Treatise* laid down the foundations for legitimizing white colonists’ superiority over “the waste and underutilized lands roamed over by savage tribes” (Williams 2001: 99). Based on this logic, colonizers planning to use the land had a justified moral claim to it, and by cultivating it they turned the land into their private property.

The US government agenda continued the policy in which the conquest was justified and operated based on the assumption of the cultural inferiority of Indigenous people. Even though the Northwest Ordinance phrased the relations as equal, promising friendship and peaceful coexistence, actions and other legal acts rendered this aspect of the Northwest Ordinance ineffectual. The federal government’s policies and actions frequently showed expediency in its attitudes to American Indians.

In the discourse surrounding Native peoples, which often referred to “the Indian problem”, public figures expressed what would currently be regarded as blatant racism and imperialism, but at the time mostly reflected the prevailing attitude. The longstanding hostility towards Native Americans found expressions like the infamous insulting phrase ‘the only good Indian is a dead Indian’, commonly ascribed to General Philip Sheridan (Mieder 1993: 38). Similarly, President Andrew Jackson’s aggressive policy of Indian Removal (interestingly enough, ignoring the ruling of the Supreme Court), which earned him resentment among Native people to this day, is also known. Others reflected a similar attitude, like Theodore Roosevelt referring to American Indians as “savage tribes, whose life was but a few degrees less meaningless, squalid, and ferocious than that of the wild beasts” (Chiarello 2005: 10), or L. Frank Baum (the author of *The Wizard of Oz*) calling for “total annihilation of the few remaining Indians” and writing of them as “untamed and untamable creatures” that should be wiped out “from the face of the earth” (Venables 1990, as quoted in Chiarello 2005: 9).

One may also encounter frequent references to Manifest Destiny as a guiding principle for expansion and removal; however, the term itself was, in fact, coined after the Indian Removal Act of 1830 in a publication from 1839 by John O’Sullivan. In the text which appeared in *The United States Democratic Review*, O’Sullivan asserts the moral justification of American policy pointing to the United States being a ‘chosen’ nation where “divine principles” (O’Sullivan 1839: 427) could be realized, and it was America’s mission to spread “the life-giving light of truth” (O’Sullivan 1839: 430) in the name of progress and civilization. This concept only reiterated and reinforced the other previously used assumptions of the moral entitlement of the dominant power to exercise its hegemony.

The ideological and political assumptions reflected the overall system privileging Euroamerican values, culture, and ways of life, at the same time rendering those different ones (‘Otherized’) as inferior, and therefore needing to be eliminated through assimilation, and/or removal often combined, leading to the destruction of Indian ways. One of the policies adopted to serve the purpose of eradicating Native ways being in stark contrast to the dominant group was the system of boarding schools for Indian children. The goal of the education in such residential schools, which started around the 1880s in the United States, was to have Native children assimilated by removing them from their families and communities (often forcefully, sometimes involving the military). They were transplanted into a system in which they were prohibited to speak their native languages, cultivate their cultures and religious practices, which for colonizers were “works of the devil” (Deloria 1988 [1969]: 105).²

2 It is interesting that sometimes in such schools it was actually the missionaries who organized the written system of a given Native language, adapting it to resemble English in terms of

In boarding schools, Indigenous students were given the message that devalued their Native identity in its entirety, the experience that left deep wounds and scars. With cutting their hair and putting on military-style uniforms Captain Richard Pratt, founder of the first exclusively Indian residential school, expressed the agenda that was supposed to “Kill the Indian and Save the Man” (Nies 1996: 291). The Native author, Zitkala-Ša, who went through the boarding school system, remembered the painful and humiliating experience writing “though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless” and “my long hair was shingled like a coward’s. In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me... I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder” (Zitkala-Ša 2003: 91).

The colonizing system of boarding schools for Indian children uprooted them as individuals, but because of the Native ways being so intertwined with communality, it also had a deeply negative effect on their communities. Deloria (1988 [1969]: 102) points out how the result was “to shatter Indian societies and destroy the cohesiveness of Indian communities”. Therefore, this forced assimilation through boarding schools has been viewed by Indigenous people and scholars trying to be in tune with Native perspectives as a form of cultural imperialism, or even cultural genocide (Haynes Writer 2008: 6). Cornel Pewewardy (2002: B22), a Comanche-Kiowa scholar and educator, argues that “the worst thing you could do to a people besides Extermination is to assimilate them. We were intentionally miseducated. Education is a form of termination”. Lutz (1997: 175), discussing the Canadian context, which was similar in the case of residential schools for Native people, uses the term “ethnocidal education”.

As a result of these colonizing measures employed with the view of eliminating Native ways, Indian cultures faced the disappearance and destruction of a large part of their cultural livelihood. However, given the scope and extent of the concerted efforts to eradicate Indigenous culture, it is truly remarkable, despite the adversities and atrocities, how much has survived. Louise Erdrich (1997: ix) shares a feeling with which many Native Americans could identify, “Every Native American is a survivor, an anomaly, a surprise on earth. We were all slated for extinction before the march of progress”. Contrary to what many anticipated, even some Native languages have survived. Deloria, a great advocate of American Indian rights, was also skeptical about the prospects for the survival of tribal languages in modern times, considering the results of the assimilation efforts and schooling, followed by the homogenizing effects of American popular

structure (Spack 2006: 46, based on Williamson 1886: 3, 5), and used the instruction involving it to indoctrinate Indian students. This was the case with the Dakota language, which was then employed to “characterize traditional stories as superstitious and Dakota or Lakota rituals and traditions as ‘evil and embarrassing’” (White Hat 1999: 90, as paraphrased and quoted in Spack 2006: 47).

culture with the widespread use of English. His prediction was that “it might not be long before only a few very traditional tribes such as Iroquois can speak their own language with any degree of assurance and confidence” (Deloria 1992: 43).

However, this pessimistic view has been only partly confirmed. On the one hand, in contemporary times in response to colonialist ideology there has been an increasing trend among Indigenous people turning to the concepts of sovereignty and self-determination in an effort to decolonize their existence. What is emphasized is their uniqueness, distinctiveness, and diversity showing that Native Americans constitute, in fact, the most diverse group of populations in the United States. Statistically there are “more than 560 distinct federally recognized tribes ... and at least half as many distinct state-recognized groups” (US Census Bureau 2007 as quoted in Brayboy et al. 2015: 2). Native languages are still used in some communities, but they have been in decline. Data from 1998 show that 15 percent of 210 Native languages were still used in the United States and Canada by all generations, 17 percent of those languages was spoken only by parents and older generations, with grandparents accounting for 40 percent and older generations for 28 percent of the speakers (Kraus 1998, as quoted in Lee 2015: 14–15).

Prevalent colonialist perspectives have affected the images of Native peoples in mainstream American culture, thus affecting American society in general, also to some extent Indigenous people themselves, as well as many people globally through the exposure to the stereotyped reductive message. The experience of American Indians has been frequently homogenized as if they simply constituted one minority group, infantilized by seeing Native people needing the help of the paternalistic government, demonized as savages, at best romanticized like the variation of “the Noble Savage”, or Pocahontas as manufactured by Disney, and racialized in all of these instances. They have often been either confined to the static past, or exploited as entertainment molded so as to fit the preconceived notions of the mainstream audience. Pewewardy expresses the opinion that “[w]e know that the white man’s images of us have little or nothing to do with the reality of Indian life. Most of these images are fictional creations of the white imagination and ignore what we are truly like” (Pewewardy 1996/1997).

Academia has not been immune to the influence of the prevailing colonialist perspectives, either, which found their reflection in the predominantly Eurocentric canon that lasted until the mid-nineties. Powell et al. (2007: 7) point out that paradoxically, even after N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969, the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* in 1979 still did not include a single Native author, and the first inclusion of Native texts took place in 1994 in the fourth edition of *The Norton Anthology*. Such canonical anthologies affect what is included in literature courses since they serve as guides as to what constitutes

literature worthy of study. Therefore, if some authors or texts are absent, it naturally translates into teachers and students of literature mostly not being familiar with them either. Joseph L. Coulombe, the editor of *Reading Native American Literature* published in 2011, shares an opinion that probably would reflect a more common phenomenon. This professor of American literature comments on his own education admitting that “[i]n over 25 years of academic training ... I was never assigned a Native author or text, a lamentable but familiar situation for students and teachers coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s.... I had an obvious gap in my education – as an Americanist, but also as an American” (Coulombe 2011: 8). Coulombe (2011: 9) also mentions that when teaching the courses including Native authors at American universities he faces students who, coming to his class, are mostly unfamiliar with any Indigenous writers. Probably it would be safe to assume that Coulombe is far from being alone facing such a teaching environment, and many other instructors in the United States and elsewhere could relate to his experience. This situation concerns even contemporary American Indian authors themselves, who were usually not exposed to Native authors either throughout their education. Sherman Alexie, a Spokane Indian writer, despite being an avid reader as a child and an adolescent growing up on a reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, was not familiar with any Indigenous writer until he went to college, when in 1987 at Washington State University, a writing instructor (and Chinese-American author), Alex Kuo, recommended an anthology of Native poetry to him entitled *Songs from this Earth on Turtle’s Back* with Joseph Bruchac as editor. For Alexie it was an eye-opening and life-changing experience (Fassler 2013). He shares that “I loved books, always, but I didn’t know Indians *wrote* books or poems” (Fassler 2013).

3. Implications for the approach

Given the context of either ignorance, misrepresentation, distortions, marginalization, or lack of interest, there is a lot to undo and unlearn. Teachers and non-Native teachers in particular, need to be aware of their limitations, realizing that much of the context and content involves lived experience, some of which may not be even accessible to them as outsiders. Some parts of Native tribal cultures regarded as most sacred may not be shared with outsiders, and also some of the most revered religious practices, e.g., songs, may be still performed in a particular tribal language). Therefore, approaching Native cultures requires exercising caution to avoid what Indigenous people might perceive as being presumptuous and showing colonizing arrogance, as expressed in Linda Hogan’s poem “Workday”:

I go to the university
And out for lunch
And listen to the higher ups
Tell me all they have read
About Indians
And how to analyze this poem.
They know us better than we know ourselves.

(Hogan 2014: 110)

Therefore, to avoid such arrogance, and in order to reflect Native American cultures and experience most effectively, it would be advisable to rely on the pedagogies and approaches developed by Indigenous scholars and educators themselves who are most informed about the context of their communities and determined to preserve their own cultures and heritage. Being guided by Native approaches and methodologies in teaching should be helpful in being in tune with the content to be presented. In this way, when Indigenous cultures and perspectives about themselves are in the center assigned the authority to represent themselves, Native people can speak for themselves.

Native Americans themselves, despite often facing a hostile environment, have been trying to make their perspectives known to others, and also making attempts to strengthen and revive their own communities and cultures, going through the process of self-definition and (re)discovering of their cultures. Those involved in the exploration and teaching about Native peoples need to focus primarily on hearing Indigenous stories about themselves, trying to apply their lens, and letting Native peoples guide them throughout the inquiry. Non-Native teachers need to be particularly receptive to Native people's perspectives following them in the manner suggested in Rita Joe's poem, "I lost my talk":

So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.

(Joe 1989: 28, as quoted in Coulombe 2011: 7)

4. Theoretical frameworks

A strong emphasis on self-representation is apparent among many Indigenous scholars and educators for whom an academic career and teaching are usually employed to benefit their communities in concrete ways, not simply for their own development as individuals or advancing their own personal goals. Frequently, apart from their scholarship and professional career, they are activists involved in championing causes that are vital for their tribes or Indigenous people in general. The elements that they often emphasize are change leading to social justice, validation of their cultures, sovereignty, and self-determination. As a result of the

efforts of Indigenous groups, some of these concepts found their reflection in the federal government decisions such as President Obama's Executive Order 13592 in 2011, which expresses the commitment of the US administration "to furthering tribal self-determination and to help ensure that AI/AN [American Indian/Alaska Native] students have an opportunity to learn their Native languages and histories and receive complete and competitive educations that prepare them for college, careers, and productive and satisfying lives" (as quoted in Brayboy et al. 2015: 4).

Contemporary Native pedagogies have drawn from the approaches which address marginalized groups with which they share the experience of oppression from the dominant group, as well as those promoting diversity. The theoretical frameworks which inspired Native methodologies include among others Multicultural Education, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Culturally Responsive Teaching. These, in turn, mostly grew out of the pedagogy of the oppressed put forward by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 2000 [1970]), as well as Ethnic and Women's Studies. All of these share the underlying goal of providing frameworks for the empowerment of particular marginalized groups. Indigenous pedagogies have used some of the concepts of these frameworks, applying them critically and adapting them to best suit the needs and characteristics of their communities.

Addressing multicultural education, Haynes Writer, a Tsalagi (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma) scholar and educator, has pointed out some of its shortcomings when it is applied superficially. She suggests that this approach should avoid the style of what she calls "food, fun, festivals, and foolishness", as otherwise it perpetuates colonization (Haynes Writer 2008: 1). Clark and Yetman (2005: 16) express a similar sentiment, postulating the shift away from "frames that limit Indigenous Peoples to functioning as exotic flavors that at best enhance and at worst corrupt rather than radically transform established academic ways of knowing". Thus, part of teaching needs to involve "unlearning the history of the 'invented Indian' to displace a cultural hegemony" (Hill 1997: 114).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy put forward by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995: 483), growing out of Black feminist thought and inspired by Freire, provided some concepts that Native peoples can relate to, such as the ethic of caring and teachers' commitment to the communities with which they work, emphasis on practical knowledge, and inspiring students' confidence through validating their experience or contributions with the view of making a difference. While many of these guiding ideas are important, they do not provide concrete and exhaustive answers to Indigenous people's environments, since Ladson-Billings's research and experience focus primarily on African American students and their communities, which may share some of the problems, but some that may be specific for Native American contexts remain unaddressed by this methodology.

Another framework providing some useful concepts for Indigenous methodologies is Critical Race Theory, which emerged from legal studies and aims at transforming power relations, exposing racism and the racialization of different parts of society to serve the white dominant group. Critical race theorists argue in favor of counter storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 42), which is intended to challenge deep-set preconceptions and assumptions through compelling stories that would bring marginalized people's experience closer to others, thus humanizing them. They also argue that members of minority groups, people of color in the United States, may offer unique insights, because they are more likely to be familiar with the dominant group's attitudes as well as their own, whereas the opposite is rarely possible (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 9). The concepts of Critical Race Theory best address the problems of African Americans, although among its most important advocates are also Richard Delgado, a Latino scholar, and Robert Williams, the Native American legal scholar cited above.

Building on Critical Race Theory, Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, a Lumbee scholar and educator, advanced a comprehensive theoretical framework addressing the context of Indigenous education. He introduces, however, necessary modifications to best fit the Native contexts, effectively identifying their most salient problems, distinctive characteristics, and uniqueness of tribal communities. Brayboy's Tribal Critical Race Theory replaces the fundamental concept of Critical Race Theory, which is racism being inherent in society, with the assertion that "colonization is endemic to society" (Brayboy 2005: 429). Although Brayboy sees that Native Americans are racialized in the society, he identifies colonization as the most important problem affecting Indigenous peoples. He calls for exploring culture "through an Indigenous lens", postulates using stories as "real and legitimate sources of data and being", and emphasizes the interconnectedness of theory and practice (Brayboy 2005: 429–430). Within this framework, stories provide a theory defining and explaining the reality and cultures of Native peoples.

Placing storytelling and lived experience at the center of the examination of Indigenous education shifts the focus toward Native ontologies and epistemologies. In opposition to viewing Native ways as if they were "frozen in the amber of the ethnographic present" (McNally 2004: 610), or static, one-dimensional artifacts confined to the past, Brayboy presents a different, more complex concept of Native cultures being "fluid or dynamic, and fixed or stable" (2005: 434), evoking the metaphor of an anchor to represent their rootedness. He also explains the notion of knowledge as a combination of cultural knowledge rooted in a tribal community, knowledge of survival related to adaptability, and academic knowledge or "book smarts", all three types being complementary, interrelated, and essential for survival (2005: 435). All of these types of knowledge are supposed to serve the

tribal community, since the idea of Indigenous identities may be encapsulated in the principle “We are, therefore I am” (Burkhart 2004: 25, as quoted in Brayboy 2005: 439). Equally important, and intertwined with identity stemming from tribal community, are stories. Rooted in Native perspectives, Tribal Critical Race Theory sees the significance of stories as “the foundations on which communities are built”, and “vehicles for the transmission of culture and knowledge” (Brayboy 2005: 439). Storytelling for Indigenous communities, serving as it does such a wide range of functions, including being a repository of knowledge and providing a basis for their identity, is essential for their sense of continuity, linking the past with the present.

Brayboy (2005: 440) suggests that listening to Native stories, or even better, hearing them, which he sees as understanding them, are key to the study of Indigenous cultures. He emphasizes the act of active listening which should result in “hearing” what is communicated. He argues that stories, apart from providing information, may affect the careful and engaged listener’s feelings and emotions as well, making it possible to access the message more effectively. He shows how this process should work: “one must be able to feel stories. You tell them, hear them, and feel them – establishing a strong sense for empathy and for ‘getting it’” (Brayboy 2005: 440).

Tribal Critical Race Theory integrates fundamental concepts contributing to Native identities with the central position of stories from which meaning, power, and self-definition are derived. This theory drawing on Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies that “are grounded in tribal histories thousands of years old” (Brayboy 2005: 441) and validating what often has been dismissed as inferior or unreliable due to its immeasurability, offers possibilities of inquiry suitable for Native people themselves as well as non-Native educators. For non-Native teachers, it provides clear and valuable guidelines as to the core concepts that need to be reflected and addressed. In the context of tribal communities, applying a particular pedagogy is not only the question of its efficacy, or quantitative reliability, since what is stake for them is the survival of their cultures. For Native communities, whose entire systems of values and beliefs, ways of being and knowing, and ways of life, have often been rendered irrelevant, or worthless, this framework provides both a way of honoring their ancestors, and also restoring Indigenous people’s sense of dignity.

The viability of Tribal Critical Race Theory can be illustrated by the experience of Native instructors teaching Indigenous students who have repeatedly faced colonialism in mainstream education from non-Native teachers. Two Indigenous scholars and educators, Kimberly Roppolo and Chelleye L. Crow, who conducted workshops for Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, recount the experience of one of their students, which in their view, is a reflection of a broader pattern (Roppolo & Crow 2007). In an article published in 2007, they describe

the situation shared with them by a Native student whose high school assignment was to write a paper about a person he admired. He wrote about his brother who was a Sun Dancer. The non-Native instructor asked him to replace the term he used, “ceremonial person,” with the term, which according to her, was more appropriate, “medicine man”. The student did not change the word as he felt that this was the proper word based on his religion. The instructor asked him what religion this was, and when he mentioned “our Cheyenne ways”, the instructor responded that Cheyenne ways was not a religion, and the student got a failing grade for his assignment (Roppolo & Crow 2007: 12). This is an example that exposes colonialism which is still apparent when mainstream values are imposed while Indigenous cultural practices and beliefs are devalued.

5. Implementation

In order to avoid colonialist perspectives, and to get closer to Native people’s experience in teaching, the inclusion of broadly understood stories is essential. Since stories figure prominently in Indigenous cultures as they perfectly encapsulate Native philosophies, ways of being, knowing, and feeling, everyday life and what is sacred, they offer valuable insights into Indigenous lives. Through stories Native voices can be heard and provided with authority through the power of their words. In the words of a few Native authors, stories are “true sources themselves” (Ortiz 1992, as quoted by Powell et al. 2007: 19), “they are a way of life” (Silko 1995: 823), “Native stories are power” (Howe 2002: 29, as quoted in Byrd 2014: 55). Stories, myths including creation stories, illuminate the questions of identity for particular tribes and their members where particular symbols convey powerful meanings for the continuity and existence of their communities. Silko (1995: 822) explains that “[t]he Origin story functions basically as a maker of our identity – with the story we know who we are.”

Stories are very often part of the oral tradition, which poses a challenge for non-Native people who cannot very easily experience or access the most authentic way of how stories are shared. With the oral tradition the crucial element involves the spoken word that comes “from the heart, unpremeditated and unrehearsed” (Silko 1995: 820). If direct experience is not possible, however, some of them can be found anthologized. Nevertheless, stories work better when they have to do with performance. LaVonne Brown Ruoff cites Andrew O. Wiget (Wiget 1987: 314, as quoted in Ruoff 1990: 14) explaining performance theory in which “stories are storytelling events”. Markowitz et al. (2004) express a similar view, pointing out that “[o]ral stories seem stilted on paper” (Markowitz et al. 2004: 33). What can be more effective is simply reading out a particular story or poem thus turning it into a kind of performance. It would be ideal if it was the author, or a Native person, but according to the article regardless of who

reads it out, this becomes an act “which revitalizes language and experience through a ritualization of the poetic endeavor and restores the site of the poem to its most ancient energies (...) even at an academic conference, or even in an academic journal” (Markowitz et al. 2004: 53). In the words of Luci Tapahonso, a Navajo writer:

They are dancing and in the motion of songs rising
our breathing becomes the morning moonlit air
The fires are burning below as always.
We are restored.
We are restored.

(Tapahonso 1993: 68, as quoted in Markowitz et al. 2004: 49)

This performance may be brought to the classroom with the use of modern technologies when direct exposure to Native people is not possible. Timothy Powell offers an interesting perspective regarding rendering Native stories in a digital format. He argues that, in fact, digital technology can reflect and capture “nonlinear temporality” (Powell et al. 2007: 17) and a sense of immediacy that are so characteristic for Native storytelling, thus enabling viewers to be transported to even very distant past. Powell involved Freeman Owle, a Cherokee, to tell his tribal stories including a creation myth, which was digitalized. Thanks to this, viewers can be exposed to the experience “across hundreds of miles and thousands of years to one of the most sacred and ancient sites in the Cherokee’s ancestral homeland” (Powell et al. 2007: 16). Native authors also read out their poems or parts of their books and make them accessible through their webpages. Joy Harjo, a Native author who writes fiction and poetry, and also writes music and performs her songs, is a good example. Her recitation or performance of the poem *Fear* turns into a much more powerful experience for students than reading it from a book. In her performance, which renders the rich sensory experience of her voice, her physicality, and emotions, she gets closer to students with the message about her life. Similarly, when she performs her *Eagle Poem* as a song in which she integrates some Native elements of the rhythm and melody, students may be exposed to a modern rendition of Native music, which is not likely to be easily found in mainstream media. Exposure to such recordings or video materials when students can hear how particular Native persons speak, or look, may be a way of debunking some stereotypes about Indigenous people, and humanizing them.

Another interesting way of accessing Native people’s perspectives is exploring their autobiographical writing where their experience comes alive on the pages of their books. The exposure to a particular Native self-narrative offers insights into the context of their communities at the same time, since Native authors writing about their own lives often relate them to the experience of their tribes. Sherman Alexie, for example, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time*

Indian (2007) and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1994) shares his own life, but simultaneously he relates it to Spokane Indians, his tribe. Similarly, Joy Harjo in her memoir *Crazy Brave* (2012) recounting her life story, places it in the context of Mvskoke/Creek and Cherokee tribes which reflect her heritage. Hertha Dawn Wong quotes Susan Friedman who refers to this as “relational identity” (Wong 1992: 14), and Arnold Krupat calls it “dialogic’ self” (1989: 133, as quoted in Wong 1992: 14). Native authors are in dialogue with their tribes even if they have a tense, conflicted relationship with them. Contemporary Native self-narratives offer a wealth of opportunities to get closer to the experience of Indigenous people in the way which is engaging and stimulating for students, since these stories are often very relatable for them. When Sherman Alexie (born in 1966) writes about his experience of growing up on a reservation from the point of view of a child, a teenager, or a young adult, he describes a reality which, on the one hand, may be alien to anyone who does not know what real reservation life involves, yet sometimes through humor, or through sarcasm, other times through the painful experience, his experience reaches the readers, because ultimately there are a lot of emotions that young people, like his characters, simply share. Harjo in *Crazy Brave*, writing from the point of view of a young, artistically gifted woman growing up in Oklahoma, in a compelling way tells her story that non-Native people can relate to as well. Through exposure to such autobiographical books students can better understand Indigenous people’s emotions and perspectives. By choosing authors from different backgrounds, students may be exposed to different facets of the Native American experience, thus suggesting the distinctiveness and multi-layered experience of particular tribes and life situations.

Reading autobiographical essays written by Native people can be helpful as well. For instance, using *First Person, First Peoples* (Garrod & Larimore 1997), a collection in which thirteen Native Americans, graduates of Dartmouth College, share their experience of studying, may be particularly relatable for students. These are stories of ordinary people who write about their lives, but since there are thirteen of them, coming from different tribes, they may demonstrate the diversity through many voices and a range of experience. The form of an essay, which is shorter, may also contribute to the manageability of classroom use.

The experience of Native peoples can also be accessed thanks to the resources that they have collected. Many Native scholars have made vigorous attempts to revitalize their cultures and languages. Their actions are supposed to help their communities to preserve and continue their heritage, and invigorate their tribes, but these efforts also provide opportunities for non-Native people to be familiarized with Indigenous perspectives. Craig Howe from the Oglala Sioux tribe is an example of an Indigenous scholar who has been devoted to Native issues through various projects such as the preparation of the National Museum

of the American Indian at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.), conducting workshops devoted to Native cultures for Native and non-Native people, etc. He has also been working on developing teaching materials, being in charge of the Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies (CAIRNS www.nativecairns.org). The Center generously offers multiple online resources including audio materials (e.g., the Lakota language), lesson plans, and even a downloadable textbook. Craig Howe, like many other Native people, shows what Native communities value most – giving back, “walking the talk”, sharing your knowledge, talents, and skills.

6. Conclusions

Thanks to Indigenous people sharing their lives through their stories or other gifts, their experience may get closer to others. Adopting the approaches that avoid colonizing, stereotyped views may help to see them as real people, First Americans, who deserve respect and whose lives matter. In teaching about Native peoples, their own voices should be given priority by letting them tell their own stories, by letting them be heard. There is a lot to be heard, but it is meant “only for those ears that are bent with compassion to hear it” (Zitkala-Ša 2003: 97).

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