

“They Had a Deep Respect for the Earth:” Teaching Ethnoecology in the Settler-Canadian Classroom

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Abstract: In courses on Indigenous peoples and the environment, the classroom becomes a potent site of Native-settler encounter, where the settler-Canadian student deploys and reinterprets existing narratives about Indigenous peoples and the land. A central character in these stories is a phantom-like Indian figure who is just on the brink of disappearing, and who has “deep understandings” ready to be transferred to the morally prepared student. In this view, being Indigenous is simply one of many mental alternatives in which the Indigenous “feeling for nature” promises to restore sustainability and simplicity to once-Indigenous westerners. These narratives silence ongoing disputes over Indigenous lands and resources and constrain teaching about the history and politics of Native-settler relations.

Key words: ethnoecology, teaching, Native-settler relations, Indigenous studies, environmentalism.

As a teacher of undergraduate courses on Indigenous peoples and the environment, I am frequently asked questions about *them*. Who *are* they? What are the Natives’ *spiritual beliefs*? What is their *culture*? Could I bring in an Elder so that we can absorb her *ancient wisdom*? Why do they have so many *problems*? How come they use guns if they *love nature*? Aren’t the traditional ways of life *disappearing*? Could we please have workshops on basket weaving, pit-cooking, and how to colour wool with plant dyes? Why didn’t the Natives realize that the fur trade would lead to *the demise of their culture*? How can *urbanized* Natives claim to be *traditional*? Why are they so *messed up*?

Such questions mark the classroom as a potent site of Native-settler encounter, where students deploy existing narratives about Indigenous peo-

ples, nature, and the land, and re-interpret them in ways that do real political work. The questions students pose and the stories they tell in class suggest that they are also encountering, explaining, and sometimes evading their own, settler-Canadian participation in “nature” and “disappearing ways of life.” The central character in these stories is the mythical Indian, who is not the passive romanticized figure of a pre-contact past, but is instead endowed with a remarkable agency: he (and sometimes she) comes to life, mobilizes so-called “deep understandings,” transmits timeless “mindsets” to young people, recovers “our common heritage as humans,” and participates in all sorts of ways in the settler-student’s environment. The student therefore enters university already knowing a great deal about this prototypical figure, who conveniently appears, disappears, and reappears

as part of nature itself. This occurs in the classroom and at other locations where the land is narrated and stories about the past are told. The effect of these encounters is to silence the politics and histories of ongoing disputes over land.

The following is an account of what I—myself a settler-Canadian—have learned about the role the imaginary Indian plays in cementing settler authority over Indigenous peoples and territories. Students' comments, questions, and analyses spoken and written across two universities and five separate courses give shape to a sort of "ideal type"—an individual student who, though not necessarily "average" or "typical," serves as a conceptual device through which I describe students' understandings of Indigenous peoples. The imagined Indian, who exists in the timeless, place-less, unattainable domain of "nature," is the ever-present interlocutor in the student's explorations of his own relationship to the land.

Vine Deloria, Jr. encountered, in his dealings with anthropologists, bureaucrats, scientists, and members of the public, many of the same stories about Indians that I heard inside the classroom. Deloria's essays on Native-settler relations are dominated by one character in particular: the anthropological fieldworker, who was free to define, theorize, and represent, and whose imaginative forays into Indian Country had gone mainstream. For me, this fieldworker appeared as an undergraduate student seeking the key to Indian culture and an explanation for Indian "problems." Through Deloria's writings, I learned to understand this student as the voice of settler privilege, and the student's Indian as disappearing yet accessible; gentle yet dangerous; primitive yet wise; authentic yet tainted. This is the impossible Indian of the settler imagination.

Throughout his career, Deloria argued that Euro-North Americans have only a shallow understanding of the land on which they live, and that their constructions of Indigenous peoples serve as a source of authenticity and as a way of legitimating a colonial order. That order is under constant threat and must be continually re-told, with the Indian as a central character. In settler stories about nature, Indians are shadows of the past. Their evolutionary trajectory ended with white contact, and their maladaptive-

ness to "progress" foretold their sad but inevitable decline.¹

Disembodied and defeated, traditional knowledge floats, available for consumption by the morally prepared student who hopes to channel the "mind-set" of the people he adopts as his ancestors. As a result the student's Indians are divided between modern Indians, or those who "are messed up" and "use modern techniques," and the mythical, phantom-like super-Indian. This division is one that Vine Deloria has also closely observed: "the Indian image split and finally divided," he wrote, "into modern Indians and the Indians of America—those ghostly figures that America loved and cherished." (Deloria 2003:28)

An Indian Presence With No Indians Present

The ghostly figure identified by Deloria moves in and out of my classroom too. He is a phantom, a relic from another time, embodying Indigenous peoples in the form of a single individual, serving only, as Deloria suggests, "to personalize the fortunes of the tribe. A mythical Hiawatha, a scowling Sitting Bull, a sullen Geronimo; all symbolize not living people but the historic fate of a nation overwhelmed by the inevitability of history" (Deloria 2003:25). He lives on, as in the timeless space of an Edward Curtis photograph, his weathered face looking far off into the distance. At the turn of the 19th century, Curtis was one of many fieldworkers attempting to salvage Indigenous peoples through texts, artifacts, and on film. His photographs today oscillate between the ethnographic and the popular (Wakeham 2008:88). The mass cultural appeal of Curtis's photographs—they can be

1 The preference by undergraduate students for grand theories and master narratives has been noted by Tad McIlwraith in his teaching blog (2009). McIlwraith calls this the "Jared Diamond Effect." In *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Jared Diamond ecologizes the familiar plot of Indigenous decline by suggesting that agricultural advancements "conquered" Native hunting societies throughout the world. The Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith identifies history as an important site of decolonization for Indigenous peoples. Western history, Smith argues, is a modernist project—a totalizing discourse into which all known knowledge can be incorporated, and in which there is forward movement through progressive stages of development. See Smith 2006:29-35.

found on posters, internet sites, and postcards—brings individuals to life in freeze-frames, but, as Wakeham suggests, the immediacy of the images hinges upon the demise of the persons depicted (94). In the classroom, the spirit of the Indian is resurrected through the death, or near-death, of his environmentally-sensitive practices. It doesn't matter what tribe he belonged to, or what happened to him: he survives only as the embodiment of environmentalism itself. "Indigenous knowledge has so much to offer in the realm of sustainable living," my student tells me. "Traditional knowledge seems to encompass so many values that western society is beginning to incorporate into culture. They had a deep respect for the earth and saw everything as interconnected."²

This is not the student's modern Indian, who he describes as "drunk," "urbanized," or as "having lots of problems." Indians of today have "lost touch with their Native roots" and have "a muddled sense of priorities and values." They fish "illegally," hunt "out of season," and are "just as bad as a white person," though this was not always the case, and wise Elders, my student assures me, counsel against such bad behaviour. These Elders are themselves an endangered species: "dying off," and living in a mythical space—"caught between two worlds"—but still able to impart timeless ecological wisdom. In preparation for his assignments, the student travels far and wide on the internet, accessing tribal secrets and becoming the confidant of wise old Indians. Indian words are strewn throughout his essays as a series of wise quotations, warning against the evils of waste and greed. "Take only what you need, use all that you take," I read, over and over again. The cruelty and folly of the white man are captured neatly in little sayings that are entrusted to the student: the intellectual disciple and inheritor of rare and valuable Indian wisdom. Like his shadowy internet ancestors, today's Elder

2 Once the land was securely in the hands of non-Natives, settlers could feel comfortable in sympathizing with the Indian, and calling on his noble qualities to critique western civilization. See Limerick 1987. The trope of the ecological Indian developed in the 1970s, during a time of growing environmental awareness and a strong American Indian rights movement. It is perhaps best illustrated by the Crying Indian—a Hollywood actor used in advertising campaigns against pollution and litter.

threatens to expire at the moment the student comes on the scene—"one of the last knowledge holders," my student says ominously. He is a kind of living dead whose death is postponed only long enough to transfer knowledge and ward off ecological ruin.

Defeated and dejected, this phantom needs life-support, and my student is eager to provide it. In the process, Indian "traditional wisdom" is transferred to the settler who, through a meeting of minds, becomes more authentically Native than "today's Aboriginal youth." These youth, I am told, are hardly children of nature. "Today's Native kids are cut off from their Native culture. But we can all learn from and adapt these important cultural values, which sadly are on the verge of disappearing." Important stories and traditional knowledge however, can be shared with the student, who insists that his introduction to Indigenous peoples comes just at the moment of their imminent disappearance, making him the caretaker of knowledge that tribal people themselves are not morally prepared to understand.³ He is set to preserve what he calls "vast ecological wisdom," which "could potentially be extremely helpful" to averting global ecological disaster. But he is not interested in actual Indigenous peoples, who Deloria says "begin to feel that they are merely shadows of a mythical super-Indian. Many anthros spare no expense to reinforce this sense of inadequacy in order to further support their influence over Indian people" (Deloria 1969:86). The student, on the other hand, does not feel like a shadow, but like the rightful, direct descendant of this Indian, and the owner and protector of disappearing traditional knowledge. I get the distinct impression that this knowledge is fading, not as the consequence of ongoing dispossession, but like the print on a page left in the sunlight, or like a rock worn down by the action of wind and weather. It is a disembodied knowledge, and has no need for the land: it is simply forgotten, washed from memory by the tides of time and progress.

With the question of land safely out of the pic-

3 Deloria (2004) describes a similar phenomenon, in which Indian buffs and writers claim to have become the confidantes and best friends of wise old Indians, who prefer to share highly sensitive knowledge with the writer, rather than with their own communities.

ture, the Indian “feeling for nature” and “deep cultural understanding” can be safely contained and transferred without conflict. The phantom Indians involved in the transfer of knowledge are nameless, timeless, and tribe-less, thereby transcending the events that made them invisible in the first place. Unaffected by the removal of forests and their exclusion from the land, they continue on, undisturbed, with their ancient practices. One such ghostly Indian figure appears as a woman, pictured on a storyboard in a wetland-turned-nature preserve, sitting cross-legged in front of a pile of reeds. Photographed in black and white, she is described simply as “Native American woman weaving baskets.” “Wetlands provided early cultures with many daily essentials,” we learn. She is unnamed—a stand-in for all Indigenous peoples—and exists in an indeterminate, prehistoric time. We are urged to discover her by looking for plant species that have outlived her extinct kin: “Native Americans wove cattail leaves into mats and used hardhack and rush stems in weaving baskets. Berries such as salmonberry, cranberry and blueberry provided important food sources. ... See if you can spot any of these native plants as you walk the trail.”⁴

Back in the classroom, I find this woman there too, a template for the student’s own “deep understandings,” “stories,” and “feeling connected to nature.” She is the “wise Elder” who has “ancient wisdom” that the student feels should be taught in school, and that he wishes he had acquired at a younger age: “I have always felt that being taught Native information when we are young can help foster our connection to the land. If popular support for radical change in societal values cannot be found within the population today, then why not begin to educate the next generation as to the benefits of Indigenous ways of knowing and living?”

Deloria suggests that we take extra care to inform students that they will not be learning about “culture,” “religion,” “spirituality,” and “environment;” that the proper place for this type of instruction is in Indigenous communities; and that university courses in American Indian studies focus on the history of Indian relations with the United States, as well as

modern expressions of Indian identity (Deloria 1998:30). This has always been my explicit approach too. Then why is this phantom so difficult to extirpate from the classroom? What can the meaning of “culture” for settler-Canadian students tell us about ongoing Native-settler relations? And can the classroom provide, as Deloria suggests, “a framework in which the demands for lands make sense” (Deloria 2003:xvi)?

Culture, Technology and Emotionality in the Berry Patch

My student is very excited about Indian culture. It is the opposite of “our technological society,” he tells me, and it is why he is taking this course on Indigenous peoples: to learn lessons in sustainable practices, and a different way of living that is in harmony with the earth. In this quest he is inspired and supported by fellow environmentalists, who see the wild state of nature as the location of Aboriginal culture. Briony Penn, a nature writer living in British Columbia, laments that “most vestiges of true aboriginal way of life in this region” are gone, “but we still have some berry patches left.” “For an uncertain future, this is a reassuring thought,” she muses. The tangled brambles of these berry patches, the rotting logs inside them, the birds and insects flitting in and out, create a situation of “chaos:” “equilibrium is reached by virtue of thousands of years of confusion. When the commercial hybrids have foundered from over-specialization, the scientists will come back to this thicket.” Her final comfort

comes from a Chilcotin legend about the repercussions of over-fulfilling one’s desires—a tale to be told in the patch. Raven once stole the only Salmonberries on earth from a sacred patch guarded by the people. He laughed so loud, thinking himself clever to steal them, that the berries all fell from his mouth and scattered over the land, springing up as new bushes wherever they fell. Standing amongst the Salmonberries, I felt it was fitting that as a tribute to our cleverness at manipulating the world, we might be left with the odd patch of berries. As those motorists zoom disdainfully by me, I’ll have the last laugh. [Penn 1999: 101-102]

4 Mercer Slough Nature Park, Bellevue, Washington.

Here, wild, chaotic nature offers a morally superior alternative at an ecologically uncertain time. This alternative is simultaneously a step back in time (the “thousands of years of confusion”) and away from technology (“manipulating the world,” “cars”), as well as a source of Native stories—“to be told in the patch.” It is pure and raw nature, unfiltered by technology, economy, or reason. This nature exists on a large scale only in remote times and places. It is where survival skills are all that stand between the hunter and starvation; nomadic bands make haphazard encounters with animals; and superstition and fear are ways of coping with unpredictable natural elements. Today, my student tells me, there are only remnants of this nature left, perhaps in the “far north” where Indigenous hunters are still “living according to their traditional ways,” and where people are living away from the “culture clash,” and with few “modern technologies.”

Much like this nature writer, my student looks to Indigenous stories to get a sense of the primordial feeling of being “connected to the earth.” But it is not only for himself that he wants to know how this must feel: it is also to find out whether or not Indigenous practices disrupt nature, and how far Indians themselves have been corrupted by “modern techniques.” Could I tell him the story of what the whale means to Makah culture? The Makah are going after whales again, this time with guns, and my student wonders whether they still really need whales. What about the Sto:lo? Do I have a story that can explain their relationship to the salmon? How is selling fish traditional? Wouldn’t money make them overfish? Perhaps we could just have “an Aboriginal person or Elder come in to tell oral stories so that students really get a feel for their importance.”

What matters in the end, my student tells me, is “mindset.” It is “mindset” that is embodied in stories and facilitated by primitive technology. As a hunter—“but not a sports-hunter!” the student insists—he too uses “traditional Native techniques,” which allow him to bridge the gap to Indigenous “emotion:” “I feel it is important to draw a distinction between ‘hunters who use traditional native techniques,’ a group of people which need not, and should not be exclusive to Indigenous peoples, and ‘hunters who use modern

techniques,’ a group which does not and should not exclude altogether Indigenous people. I feel hunting is a timeless aspect of human existence, and has a special place in my own heart. Hunting is something I take very seriously and practice with much emotion.”

Participating in ancient “mentalities” or “emotions” allows for a heightened awareness of nature, but when it comes to wildlife biology—actually knowing about animal populations and allocating hunting rights—these mentalities seem to lack any real empirical reference, and cannot be taken seriously as fact. Yet wisdom and certain factoids may be gleaned from them: “though we may disagree with the mentalities associated with these societies and the means in which they regard the natural systems, taking advantage of the vast ecological wisdom acquired over so many generations could potentially be extremely helpful,” the student writes. This “wisdom” contains “emotion,” and also valuable nuggets of ecological information, such as the clever tricks Indians used to find and process plants and animals in a “sustainable” manner, and to shield themselves from weather and disease. “Sadly,” my student laments, “in our attempts to assimilate them, we have also thrown away immense information and knowledge in regards to the land.” This continual fluctuation, between what Deloria calls “a recognition of Indians’ practical knowledge about the world” and “outright admiration for their sense of the religious” is not only “unsettling and unproductive,” but it also “does not attribute to Indians any consistency, nor does it suggest that their views of the natural world and religious reality had any more correspondence and compatibility than do Western religion and science” (Deloria 2001:1-2).

The religiosity of imagined Indigenous knowledge is glossed in class as “deep understanding,” and is considered the opposite of science, where technology and reason (“problem solving”) and a reliance on calculation and facts dominate. “Traditional knowledge” is considered the realm of faith and belief, rather than knowledge itself. It is neither empirical nor theoretical, and it is practical only because simple technologies did not require sophisticated or consistent human analysis. My student, who believed the

course would teach him about sustainable living and green lifestyles, yearns for a lost time when modern technologies did not interfere with this type of human relationship with nature.

Life in the past was simple and straightforward, “without the need to problem-solve,” and without the need for complex technology: “when a resource such as balsamroot is harvested, protected and nurtured in appropriate ways, there is no need for technology to advance beyond variations of a digging stick.” These societies were “simple and in-depth,” rather than “convoluted and inaccessible,” and had “a broad view” rather than a “narrow and technical” one: “they were not technologically, academically or politically advanced, but they were emotionally advanced.” It is morality and emotionality (residue from the past), rather than science and technology (unique to the present), that marks stories and practices as Indigenous.

This construction of culture requires Indians to be located at a particular point in time, and that time is not now. The Indigenous youth of today, the student laments, “would rather have the latest cell phone than the oldest ecological knowledge.” Since technology is considered absent or relatively primitive in true Indigenous ways of life, the achievement of Indian culture seems to be their stagnation in time, or the very *absence* of technological progress. In an essay praising the Indian for treading lightly on the earth, the student writes, “though it would be difficult to argue that North American Indigenous peoples would have developed a material technology advanced enough to physically reach them to the moon had they been left alone, one could easily argue that the world would be nowhere near its irreparably damaged and unbalanced state.”

As a stagnant cultural form, Indigenous knowledge is understood as a kind of proto-science, that has preserved what the student refers to as the “whole system,” through “thousands of years of trial and error,” and on fishing grounds with “simple stone traps.” This is a nature experienced directly, without the intervention of interpretation, theory, or even empirical investigation. Through direct experience of primordial nature, the student understands a time when the world stood still: “while European culture

is characterized by increasingly complex and convoluted human systems, Native culture is premised on understanding the original complex system.” His is an accessible, personally experienced nature. It is the nature, and the childhood, the student feels he never had.

This approach to categorizing Indigenous knowledge sees Indigenous practices as a stage in a progression of beliefs, best grasped in childhood—a recapitulation of cultural development in human ontogeny. Childhood, like the phantom Indian’s golden age, is a time when wonder, awe, and playful discovery sets the stage for a “holistic science.” Indigenous knowledges are the recovered tools that were lost somewhere along the way, and that presage their uses in the modern world: “techniques for sustainable extraction were developed,” I am told, “over generations of Aboriginal people interacting with and respecting the environment.” And these techniques “were passed down to children by knowledgeable Elders,” a process that mirrors the student’s own position as a learner. Childhood features prominently in the student’s view of what education could become: not the “extremely dry” material of his science classes, but filled with stories about animals that anyone can relate to, “if only they are willing to listen.” Getting rid of artificial “mental divisions,” and “opening up your heart” is a kind of reverse educational process in which “getting back to basics” allows one to backtrack from the status quo and “regain a connection to the land.” This linear metaphor twists into one strand individual human growth (child development) and social evolution (progress), where the past is an unravelling of the present, and at the same time a way of solidifying the present through smarter progress. “When we incorporate Indigenous knowledge into school programs, we can learn the deep respect the Indigenous population had for sustainability.”

Much like the visitor to the berry thicket, my student has discovered in Indigenous nature a setting that serves as an authentic, original reference point. Nothing happened there—at least nothing fact-based, documented, objective, or testable—but it is where the Indian *feels* nature, and where abstractions of Indigenous life—the settler’s stories—find their form long enough to be transported into the pres-

ent. It is where moral content forms the background rather than the substance of ecological relationships, and where nature is a concept hidden beyond the horizons of time and space. The settler student, like “the white man” of Deloria’s analyses, “has the marvellous ability to conceptualize. He also has the marvellous inability to distinguish between sacred and profane. He therefore arbitrarily conceptualizes all things and understands none of them” (Deloria 1969:188-189).

Reconciling the Culture Clash: Indians-are-us

Such conceptualizations and abstractions turn Indigenous knowledge into “values,” which act as convenient containers in which culture can be carried around, under the assumption, as Vine Deloria would put it, “that being Indian is a state of mind” (Deloria 1998:30). As a state of mind, values are universal and do not need Indigenous people, nor any people, for that matter, to exist. They simply swirl around in a timeless manner, bringing the inner kernel of humanity back to us westernized moderns. They are part of “our common heritage as humans,” my student writes triumphantly.

If these values can be freely taken on, felt, and just as freely discarded, then decolonization is just one of many mental alternatives, requiring nothing more than empathy and what my student has branded “cultural recognition.” Without reference to place, this Indians-are-us attitude does away with any conflict over the land. After all, such conflicts exist only in the mind, and can be resolved without reference to historically-based grievances: “Contrary to the assumption that settlers are inherently non-relational, those more relational practices have been buried by centuries of an increasingly dogmatic and controlling concept of social and ecological relations,” my student writes. He goes on to say: “what if we were once all native to somewhere, but our thought processes were all ‘colonized’ at some point?” Indians, my student tells me, like the ideal society of the past and future, had “simple understandings,” and “had no need for complex social structures;” instead “they lived by a few key beliefs that are simple, elegant, natural and which replace the myriad of institutions

western culture has created.”⁵

How is the student to resolve, within this scenario, Indigenous realities, such as lack of control over lands, forests, fisheries, education, language, child welfare, and governance, I wonder? What happens when unexpected “emotions,” or “angry Indians,” such as the ones blocking highways or logging roads, invade this peaceful image? What would happen if the student were thrust, not into a clash of “cultures,” but a clash of people—not “reconciliation” and “sharing,” but contention over land? For Deloria, such contention is the substance of what the settler North American calls cultural sharing: “There was never a time when the white man said he was trying to help the Indian get into the mainstream of American life that he did not also demand that the Indian give up land, water, minerals, timber and other resources which could enrich the white men” (Deloria 1969:174).

When fishing and hunting rights, or Aboriginal title enter the classroom, the culture clash gets serious: the student discovers he has been idealizing the Indian all along. Like Shepard Krech in *The Ecological Indian* (1999), the student sets out to debunk what he knows is a “romanticized” image: the Indian as a gentle child of nature mystically connected to non-humans. “So go argue with your mother,” Deloria would say, directing the student to consider how such images are not of Indigenous origin, but are rather “the lies of the previous generation of whites, who wanted to believe these things about Indians” (Deloria 1992:402). By expelling him from the

5 The assumption that Indigenous beliefs are simple, straightforward, and easily summarized persisted in the classroom, despite readings to the contrary. In one of the required texts for the course, *Two Families: Treaties and Government*, Harold Johnson writes that “under the law of the Creator, a student can spend a lifetime trying to understand three words: ‘All My Relations.’ ... But who are my relations? How should I relate to them? Why should I remember them when I gather from nature? Why should I remember them when I finish speaking? There are simple answers to these questions, but no complete ones. I could spend a lifetime trying to understand, and never know it all” (18-19). On the arrogance of outsiders, he writes: “When something is seen from a distance, it appears small, and some people are fooled into believing that they have an understanding of it” (20).

“dark green” end of the environmentalist spectrum, the student frees the Indian from the lie of ecological nobility.⁶ According to Krech, and my student, the Indian needs to be stripped of his qualifications as an environmentalist; after all, he engaged in all manner of destructive practices, such as overhunting and setting out-of-control fires. Like Krech, the student links ecological damage not to evidence of human-caused extinction or widespread devastation, but rather to claims that Indians adhered to irrational cosmological constructs, and were poorly equipped to know the power of their own subsistence practices. The spectre of this Indian rises from the ashes of his historical decline when claims to nature have material consequences: “I feel like in this class we romanticize Native people. How can they live sustainably when their populations are growing faster than the non-Native population?” I am asked. Indians, after all, my student tells me, are disconnected from their “traditional ways,” and developed a desire for land only recently, when it increased in value.

I try to fill the room with new characters. I show a photo of Harriet Nahanee, a Nuu-chah-nulth and Squamish elder and activist, facing arrest but thrusting a copy of the Royal Proclamation, which recognizes Indian title to unceded lands, in the face of a police officer. Nahanee was protesting against the expansion of a highway near Vancouver, and later died in jail. I show another picture, this time of Tahltan Elders blocking Royal Dutch Shell from accessing the sacred headwaters, and reading a statement that they will always be there. These Elders want to protect the headwaters of the Skeena, Nass, and Stikine rivers, including their sensitive salmon and wildlife habitats, from being contaminated by coal-bed methane extraction. I assign articles by Sonny McHalsie on the history of Sto:lo fishing places, and by Arthur Manuel on the assertion of Aboriginal rights by Secwepemc land users.

6 Paul Nadasdy in “Transcending the Debate over the Ecologically Noble Indian” argues that debates about whether Indigenous peoples are environmentalists are actually arguments about where they belong on the spectrum of environmentalism; such a spectrum assumes that environmentalism is a variable that can be plotted on a single axis.

For their final essay assignment, I ask the students to write a review of any book in the field of ethnology, and I provide a long list of possible titles. The most innocuous-sounding titles appear to be the most popular—“The Earth’s Blanket,” “Ecologies of the Heart,” and “Women and Plants.” Despite the course’s focus on the history of Native-settler relations, no one chooses “Fish, Law and Colonialism,” “As Their Natural Resources Fail,” “Kiumajut (Talking Back)” or “Hunters at the Margin.” My student is upset: he has picked a book on reef net fisheries—“lots of great information on cultural practices” he tells me mid-way through—only to find the last chapter entitled Genocide.⁷ In fact, speaking of injustice in the present, as many Indigenous authors do, is not only “biased” but downright dangerous: “faced with the realities of the colonial past, it is clear that blame is due. However, the way this blame is expressed could incite among First Nations readers feelings of hate and alienation that may, in the long run, be counter-productive to the quest for a better future.” Words like “dispossession” and “forced assimilation” are too “alienating,” he concludes.

Vine Deloria knew such censorship well: books “chronicling contemporary outrages” had difficulty getting published in the 1960s and 70s, for fear that they would “stir up bad feelings between Indians and whites” (Deloria 2003:26). I seem to have stirred up a lot of bad feelings, and I am warned to be careful: my student suggests that “openness,” rather than a “rigid agenda” can help transform “negative attitudes about Indians,” and “cultural misunderstanding.” “I have found that it is not helpful to create excessive controversy around social and environmental issues,” my student writes. “I believe that through the open telling of the truth without a rigid agenda is the best way to inspire ‘Aha!’ moments in your audience.” We have come to the end of the term. He is tired of my “bias.” I am “too political,” and he wishes I would just “stick to the subject matter.”

We just need to learn, he tells me, who the Indians *really* are. What is their relationship with nature? I get some advice too: “Many schools have begun to increase the level of outdoor, practical learn-

7 See Claxton and Elliot 1994.

ing. There are no doubt many within local Indigenous communities who would be more than happy to share their knowledge with students. Furthermore, this would work to empower the all too marginalized Indigenous communities across the country. I hope I get to have this experience in the rest of my courses here.” And so, the task of learning about Indian culture is postponed to next semester.

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