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Examining Indian History

What should authors be aware of when writing about Indian people? How should they tackle or handle the issues associated with Indian people? Most importantly, how does an author make sense of Indian histories and convey the messages of Indian people? What are necessary ethical codes for scholars or authors to follow in order to achieve writing about Indian history?

First, one needs to be weary of what an authors intentions are for the article or book your reading, and be conscious of any mixed motivations for they're writing. The audience at one time should have been skeptical because most scholars were writing for publishing purposes, so they could build up their career or even just to make an income. It's an author's responsibility to be aware of the ethics for writing about American Indian history. Authors should avoid exploiting Indian people, along with romanticizing them. It is also their responsibility to investigate when it is appropriate to record their research due to certain ceremonies or other sensitive knowledge. Additionally, people need to admit what has actually happened in the past, and stop trying to gloss things over. Acknowledge what has happened as best as possible, thus allowing us all to continue to grow, and work together. As Fixico said, "...these approaches described the white experience, as if Indians did not exist" (Fixico, 30). So we need to move toward showing Indian perspectives as well. White scholars especially need to get over guilt, and focus on the truth.

Even more responsibility is added to be truthful and to stay away from romanticizing Indian people. Authors need to think in terms of culture, community, environment, and metaphysics (Fixico, 31). Also, be open to oral history and get out of the Amerocentric

interpretation of Indian history, and lean more toward ethnohistory. Ethnohistory goes beyond the limitations of disciplines because it combines two fields (Fixico, 31). “Use ethnohistorical methodologies to reconstruct history according to how tribal members remember it” (Fixico, 36). Yet, there needs to be awareness that American Indian history is not one of all Indian people. There are 547 federally recognized tribes in the United States and more that remain unrecognized, and all have different identities. On the ethical level, there has to be consideration for doing away with negative uses, using all kinds of evidence, and finally visitation with Indian people in their homelands. When writing the Indian viewpoint needs to be taken into account. Also, avoid negative terminology and suppressing Indians, so encouragement is focused on pursuing the unknown or little-known history of Indians.

“Obtaining a tribal viewpoint, a Native feeling, and the other side of history, and then thinking like an Indian and putting yourself in that other position are mandatory for teaching and writing a balanced history of Indian-white relations” (Fixico, 35). The deliberate removal of ethnocentrism and consideration of Indian viewpoints, while striving to think as an Indian are important. Richter said, instead be a critic of culture, one who examines the past and doesn’t celebrate it. “Instead, the need is to construct a larger vision of both native and Euro-American experiences (and, indeed, of the experiences of all the peoples who have shaped North American society) that is inclusive and empowering, rather than imperialistic and dominating” (Richter, 389). “...cultural descendents of European males may rise above mere guilt to discover the strands that entwine their heritages with those of other ethnic groups and provide a basis from which to construct a story of the North American past that belongs to us all” (Richter, 393).

Some issues Axtell raises are, to avoid writing about Indian history as if it were merely a footnote. Additionally, resist writing as if Indian people as either obstacles to white settlement or

victims of oppression. One of the countless other approaches to writing Indian history is the contributions approach; even though it may be flawed, it's still useful. The English seen themselves as God's chosen people, so a sense of mentality developed with Indians—the mentality to conquer, but the Indian presence acted as a major check on colonial development. Without the presence of the Indian populations, slavery probably would have been a lot worse during the colonial period because lands would need to be cleared for farms and so forth. The colonists would have lacked a secure livelihood. "Slavery would have began earlier and accelerated faster" (Axtell, 990).

"The Indian presence precipitated the formation of an American identity" (Axtell, 992). Names of states and streets would be replaced with other generic names, along with animal names. There are also a lot of other material possessions that would have not existed without the presence of an Indian population during the colonial period. "It is ironic because after nearly two centuries of trying to take the Indians' lives and lands, the colonists appropriated not only the native identity but the very characteristics that thwarted the colonists' arrogations" (Axtell, 996).

After reading Vine Deloria Jr.'s chapter on anthropologists, it became clear that when anthropologists have their own agenda, mixed motivations for their work and even just to get published, I'm more inclined to agree with his "radical" view of the field. Otherwise today most anthropologists are embracing these new ethics previously mentioned and thinking with an Indian viewpoint, and actually considering the importance of oral histories. Hopefully anthropologists are no longer on reservations to only verify what they already know. In regard to the ethics and responsibilities for those writing Indian history, he agrees for the most part on issues raised by Fixico, Richter, and Axtell. However he goes a little further by explaining that Indian people just like everyone else are accustomed to change. Indian people have adapted to

changes brought upon them by colonization, and as a result certain cultural traits have changed as well. Indian people did not and still don't remain the same as before the colonial period.

Yet, Deloria noticed one difficulty many Indian people face, and he is referring to the many "hats" Indian people have to wear, like living in two worlds. One example is a reservation Indian who is yet in academia at the same time. He is very focused on getting the point across to stop romanticizing Indian people and culture. Indian people are human beings and they adapt to whatever challenges being dealt their way, and about being truthful when one researches.

In retrospect the authors I've read this semester have done a good job of at least acknowledging these ethics and responsibilities raised earlier, and some more than others. To begin, Richter was my favorite; I liked the approach he used. He defiantly acknowledged that Indian people were subject to change, but aspects of continuity could be seen throughout his book. Which can be seen in the chapter titles of his book: imagining a distant new world, confronting a material new world, living with Europeans, native voices in a colonial world, native peoples in an imperial world, and finally separate creations. I especially liked how after careful research, he was able to give you example stories of personal histories. He wrote with an Indian viewpoint, and I can't recall but I don't remember any examples of romanticizing and I feel he constructed both viewpoints very well. I liked Richter's attempt to introduce the native perspective into the history of the colonial period.

Additionally, White's book and his metaphor of the middle ground is extremely educational and a good history text, since it is packed with a good deal of historical information. In retrospect, I can't recall if it really portrayed the Indian viewpoint, but it certainly did it some justice. He avoided romanticizing, using negative terminology, and other important suggestions in the ethics and responsibilities of writing about Indian people. He allows the idea of change

and continuity to flow throughout his work, and that has been appreciated. I liked White's metaphor of the middle ground which portrays the clash of cultures and how they adapted to the idea of living amongst each other. They were able to reinvent themselves, which I feel allowed for their survival.

When looking at Knaut's work on the Pueblo, there is evidence of him acknowledging the idea of change. His idea of the constant religious resistance that was present in his writing was an attempt to portray an Indian viewpoint. He gives plenty of information to build up his case by showing how despite all they were faced with, they still managed to keep a sense of religious identity alive. Dealing with the friars, the Spanish, and the effects of colonization, the Pueblo resistance can be seen as a form of political resistance, and personally that is a strong statement.

Saunt followed the example by others and acknowledged the changes the Creeks were faced with; changes culturally, politically, economically, and ecological. Here is a great example of Indian adaptability, especially of Creek women and how their world was changed upside down by the Spanish presence. Creeks managed to resist and made strong attempts to hold on to their old ways. So as Saunt portrays, Indian communities did not remain the same, but on the contrary began adapting and reinventing themselves since the colonial period.

Yet, Blackhawk offered valuable information about the Great Basin region that was previously unpopular. He took the responsibility of pursuing the unknown or little-known history, and has opened the doors for others to take in the example. Blackhawk reminds me of White's book on the middle ground; it's filled with valuable information, but lacks a certain spark. However the introduction and epilogue are great examples of his passion. What is lacking with Blackhawk is a central overarching theme besides violence; I feel that another thing

should go along with it, like how culture changed for both the Ute and Shoshone peoples.

Violence is important and I'm glad he's acknowledging it, but his stance makes it incomplete.

In retrospect, all these authors have managed to write truthfully and with some aspect of an Indian viewpoint in mind. Also more importantly, all have managed to avoid negative terminology, suppressing, and romanticizing Indian people. I feel all have stepped outside the Amerocentric interpretation. They have honestly acknowledged the truth and individuality of Indian people. Again, all have shown an overarching theme to get across, and have kept Indian people in mind as they did so.

When asked if I thought there was a difference in an American Indian scholar and a white scholar my initial reaction was yes. Yet, after considerable debate, I still agree with my original assumption. I do believe that an Indian scholar would write differently due to experiences, and I would go as far in saying that everyone writes differently. However, there are certain common elements among scholarly writing, and I'm confident an Indian scholar is different. There is a difference because of what Deloria and Blackhawk wrote in particular that Indian people are faced with different "hats" to wear, never fully belonging in one. It's like belonging to two worlds or as Blackhawk said, "the square pegs of Indian experiences so rarely fit the circular holes of received knowledge that the experiment can appear at times futile" (Blackhawk, 293).

So I would say that scholars do a terrific job when they write, but I have hope that the voice of an Indian scholar is stronger, filled with passion, and maybe even seen as radical. A few that comes to mind as examples are Vine Deloria Jr., Angela Wilson, and Chris Mato Nunpa. However, it all depends on what the central overarching theme is and what they plan to get across to the audience. Blackhawk is an example of an Indian scholar whose view is no different from an ordinary scholar. I say this because his writing is an excellent addition to the canon of

Indian history, but he lacks passion throughout his book except for in the epilogue. He is too focused on violence, which is important in colonial history, but his route is lacking. He should have paired it up with either cultural resistance, or religious resistance, or change for example, and then it would have been more effective. As a result, his view probably would have shown his passion more clearly. He is certainly taking on an Indian viewpoint, but he should have built it up stronger because it stands out no stronger than your average scholarly writing.

In conclusion, scholarly writing can stand apart depending upon what the central organizing theme is. As long as that is strong, I feel an Indian scholar's writing will stand apart from other scholarly writing; especially since there are many different hats for Indian people to wear. One can have two different hats to wear by merely having a reservation hat due to where you live and an academic one by going to school. Also, there is the urban Indian hat because not all Indian people live on the reservation. There are all different kinds of views depending on lived experiences and I strongly believe those help shape you're writing. So everyone writes differently, and that is something that needs acknowledgment. So as a result, Indian scholarly writing can stand apart from scholarly writing in general. Even though other non-native scholars write just as well or sometimes better, which is all due to the increasingly acceptability of the ethics and responsibilities raised either for writing about Indian history.