

# TOWARDS AN ESSENTIAL NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

Contrary to the postmodernist critique of essentialism, Native peoples of North America retain primordial Native essence. This essence is realized in the Natives' symbiotic relationship with land and nature. This, combined with a sense of place where they belong, and the connectedness of all forms of life resist the constructionist model of identity advocated by postmodernism. Thus, from Natives' perspective, postmodernism acts like a conceptual cannibal invented by Whites to erase everything that does not conform to the White norm. In arguing that identity is more about self identification and culture than about blood, the essay proves Natives' agency and pushes the limits of discourse.

Contrairement aux critiques postmodernes de l'essentialisme, les peuples autochtones de l'Amérique du Nord conservent leur essence autochtone primordiale. Cette essence est concrétisée dans les relations symbiotiques des Autochtones avec la terre et la nature. Alliées à un sentiment d'appartenance et d'interdépendance de toutes les formes de vie, ces relations résistent au modèle constructionnel de l'identité mis de l'avant par le postmodernisme. Aussi, dans une perspective autochtone, le postmodernisme est un cannibale conceptuel inventé par les Blancs pour effacer tout ce qui ne se conforme pas aux normes des Blancs. En avançant que l'identité vise plutôt l'auto-identification et la culture que les liens de sang, le présent article démontre le pouvoir des Autochtones et déborde les limites du discours.

Concepts like essentialism, culture, identity and resistance, have been interrogated in cultural theory in the recent years. Certain paradigm shifts that have entered cultural studies are the notions of essentialism as misnomer, culture as hybrid, identity as contingent and resistance as impossibility. Attempts to deconstruct these issues and their displacement are incompatible with Native American experience and identity. Since discourse and representation cancel difference, their normativity needs to be challenged by Native culture and lived experience. In spite of the postmodern denial and suspicion of cultural essence, the latter has been at the centre of Native politics. Recovery of that purity and past are fundamental to Native American identity.

This brings into focus the opposition of essentialism and constructionism. Essentialism believes in a fixed essence and an idea of a pure origin, to which individuals must conform. In contrast, constructionism believes that there is nothing pure and originary, because discourse invariably mediates in the formation of identity. Critics of essentialism argue that as various tribes did not experience life the same way, there is no constant determinant of Native identity. This formulation ignores the fact that all these tribes were colonized and dispossessed, dislocated and subjected to cultural genocide. The denial of an origin and authenticity to the former victims of White history does not fit into the agenda of Native resistance. The refusal to acknowledge Native origin and purity perpetuates the colonial myth of 'a people without history.' Even though there is no standardized Native due to internal heterogeneities, Natives have a collective sense of origins rooted in the land and tribal ways of life.

Natives represent the most primordial and immutable state of existence among all ethnic groups in North America. This primodality defies all discursive models and constructionist approaches. This Native essentialism has survived White discursivity. Rudolfo Anaya says,

After long years spent in the realm of imagination and creativity, I came to understand that many of the symbols which welled up from my subconscious were not learned, they were part of my ethos, symbols from the archetypal memory residing in the blood. (in Cochran 83)

Purity as myth is one of the most pervasive ideas associated with the constructionist approach. But Kenneth Lincoln talks about Native "prelapsarian origins before the European "invasion" " (Lincoln 13), which reestablish that purity. Another argument against essentialism is that Native experience is changing and that Native response to the invasion was diverse. But Paula Allen asserts this commonality thus.

... there is a permanent wilderness in the blood of an Indian,

a wilderness that will endure as long as the grass grows, the wind blows, the rivers flow, and one Indian woman remains alive. (Allen 183)

Thus, the common charges against an essentialist approach are proved null and void. The reference to 'permanence' and 'blood' explodes the concept of postmodern constructionism.

Joane Nagel believes that ethnic identity is a "dialectic between internal identification and external ascription" (Nagel 21). In a way, external labeling and categorization can be a position of strength because one cannot resist an externally imposed category, without rallying around that label. Natives cannot fight the imposition of racial inferiority without organizing themselves as Natives. But Native identity is multi-patterned and multi-levelled that can be both heterogeneous and unitary. A Native is affiliated to a clan, tribe, reservation and nation, but one affiliation usually dominates over others at a particular point in time. A Native could be a full-blood or half-blood or quarter-blood in the reservation; a Sioux or Navajo while interacting with members of other tribes, and a Native or Indian while interacting with Whites or non-Natives. This is not to deny the various facets of Native identity. One could say that one facet dominates over others at a given time. It all depends on the position from which Natives speak and the position in which Natives believe the other to be. For non-Natives, a Native is a Native, not a Laguna or Cherokee, nor full-blood or half-blood. In the world of opacity and difference, there can be only two locations: Native and White. The question of erasing particularisms does not arise since one is one because one is either this or that. This kind of identification does not recognize an internal fracture or heterogeneity.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) observed that Indians, to claim their status as Indians, must "live in a distinct, autonomous community perceived by others as Indian" and "that all its members can be traced genealogically to an historic tribe" (Nagel 242). The first part of the quotation gives importance to external ascription. Besides external ascription and individual identification, identity is also a matter of genealogy, roots and blood, as shown in the second part of that quotation. Chicanos, in "El plan de Aztlan," declared that "the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny" (Moya 2). Native identity is about Native experience, trials, tribulations, and material participation in Native traditions. An assimilated full-blood Indian is not really a Native. Admiration for Native ways of life and the desire to live that tradition make a Native. Native identity can be found in the lost stories, medicine dances, visions and collective memories. Yet psychic identification cannot make a White a Native. At the core of Native identity lies an op-

position to civilization and White values. The knowledge of a common origin, forced dispossession, an uncontaminated life and a struggle for its renewal make a Native. The racial memory of dispossession and betrayal shapes the Native identity, which makes Natives resisting subjects.

What is the Native essence, which continues till the present time? Rudolfo Anaya talks about primordiality that binds the Native with the land: “from my mother I had learned that man is of the earth, that his clay feet are part of the ground that nourishes him” (in Cochran 82). A communal sense of self and a sense of place are the legacies that Natives cherish even today. Lincoln believes that “tribe means an earth sense of self” (Lincoln 8). By revisioning what he is in relation to a particular place, a Native forms his identity. Olson and Willson remark, “combined with the sense of community, the concept of place gives Native Americans a sense of roots and belonging” (Olson and Wilson 216). Simon Ortiz of Acoma Pueblo community believes that place gives identity to Natives.

You recognize your birth as coming from a specific place, but that place is more than just a physical or geographical place, but obviously a spiritual place, a place with the whole scheme of life, the universe, the whole scheme and power of creation. Place is the source of who you are in terms of your identity, the language that you are born into and that you come to use. (Coltelli 105)

This sense of place is not ornamental, but one deeply embedded in Native blood. Far from being romanticized, it is a material practice and a conviction. This conviction can be seen in Allen’s observation that “we are the land” (Allen 119).

This sense of place resists the postmodern notion of constructionism. It also ruptures the conceptual difference between man and place. Navajo oral literature requires students to identify themselves with a particular place. In a particular emergent narrative, the Sun tests the Hero Twins by asking them to identify themselves with various places.

He asked “Where is your home?” The boys knew where their home was. They pointed out Huerfano Mountain and said that was where they lived. The Sun next asked, “What mountain is that in the East?”

“That’s *Sis Naajini* (Black Peak),” replied the boys.

“What mountain is down here below us?”

“That’s *Tsoodzi* (Mount Taylor),” said the boys.

“What mountain is that in the West?”

“That’s *Dook’o’osid* (San Francisco Peak).”

“Now, what mountain is that over in the north?”

“Those are the *Dibe’Nitsaa* (La Plata Mountains).” (Evers 213)

After this the Sun is convinced about the boys’ knowledge of their being in the world. Thus the fixity of Native identity is established.

Central to Native systems is the inherent connectedness of all life. Every story and ceremony tells Natives that they are a part of the universe since they participate in the unity of being. In every Native ceremony, personal concerns are subordinated to communal needs. For Natives, the quest for harmony involves other members of their tribe. The Navajos call themselves ‘Dine’ which means ‘the people’; for the Athabascan Indians of Alaska, there is no word for ‘I,’ but only ‘we’; Iroquois means ‘we-the-people.’ Land and property were also communal till the arrival of Euro-American civilization. Even today, Natives, across tribes, believe in a reality, which is indivisible and transcends everything.

But there are certain aspects of Native existence, which force us to believe in the workings of discourse and power. To say that Natives are immune to White discourse would be stretching essentialism too far. There are many visible signs of culture contact like biological hybridity and appropriation of English and White ways of living. How does one validate Native culture and identity in an age mediated by discourse? Empirically speaking, there is neither a pure Native nor an authentic Native experience today. As there are only a few or no full blood Natives left, an essentialist Native identity is impossible. Natives, today, are already assimilated and their experience is mediated by European assumptions and world-views. Sceptics would contest the notion of an uncontaminated Native culture and identity on these grounds. But what is Native identity all about? Is there any authentic Native identity on which Native consciousness can be based? Or does consciousness invent Native identity?

These questions bring into focus the concept of strategic essentialism, a concept popularized by Spivak. This essentialism can be used strategically “not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of anything” (Spivak 51). Natives and Native authors revision Native myths and rituals to rupture White normativity. Even though some aspects of essentialism cannot be established biologically, they can be retained as strategies to resist the universalizing White American culture. This essentialism is a strategy for resistance, and has to do with retaining Native culture than about blood.

Seen from another perspective, the conflict between essentialism and constructionism vanishes. Discovering an identity and constructing an identity, being and becoming, are one and the same thing. Native

identity is about commonality and about positioning oneself strategically to be one with the story of origin. The collective memory of Natives and their sense of loss do not allow us to treat them as two different ways of conceiving identity. The Natives, segregated in reservations, not only discover, but also construct their identities to find their roots and the originary moment. Here constructionism is not the negation of the essence, but a route to roots. Five hundred years of subjugation are not enough to erase the sense of roots from the memory of a people whose history is 2,500 years old. Forgetting of roots could have served the colonial purpose since lapses of memory are vital to colonialism. Paula Allen tells us that “the roots of oppression are to be found in the loss of tradition and memory because that loss is always accompanied by a loss of a positive sense of self” (Allen 210). Natives, who have a sense of that unalienated life, construct their identity to be one with their roots. Momaday’s protagonist Abel and Silko’s Tayo are shown to be in search of their roots. Such characters do not see an opposition between essentialism and constructionism. It is their unification with the past that shapes the present. The isolated individual becomes a thorough Native. One constructs one’s identity and that construction comes to a close when one finds it in one’s tradition. This happens in the cases of Tayo and Slash, the protagonists of *Ceremony* and *Slash*. Not biological insiderism but a strategic insiderism can close its doors to the external power. The recognition of this location is a refusal to be absorbed and assimilated. One does not inherit this location, but discovers it. This communal identity is allied with sameness and unity, which have been dismissed in postmodern theory. Much of postmodern theory has developed cultural models based on the linguistic system that amounts to a kind of semiotic imperialism. Constructing an identity based on difference, in contrast to the Native construction of identity based on Native sameness, is another facet of Western individualism.

Constructionism used by cultural studies today and in Native experience must be distinguished. Cultural constructionism or discursive formation of identity is an unconscious internalization of dominant codes, which cancels Native agency and resistance. The individual gives in to the play of dominant practices. But, as far as Native experience is concerned, Natives consciously come to be one with their roots, which gives Natives the power of agency and choice.

It is a very difficult task to fix the definition of a ‘Native.’ Besides the cultural factors that shape Native identity, the state has laid down rules to judge Indianness for the purpose of allocation of grants and aids. In the US, a person must live on a reservation, or be of Eskimo descent, to be eligible for federal aid. Besides that, persons who can prove one-

fourth Indian blood in their bodies are also recognized as Indians. Canada distinguishes between status and non-status Indians. The former people had made treaties with the government, but the latter had not. Both categories enjoy all the privileges that the state grants to Indians.

Biological determinism was the foundation on which land allotment was based. The whole plan was designed to destroy the communal way of life and individualize each Native. The Dawes Act of 1887 empowered BIA to allot 160 acres of tribal land to each head of the family and forty acres to each minor. This allotment was to remain in force for 25 years. But the Burke Act of 1906 allowed competent Indians to transfer or sell their land and Competency Commissions were established to determine competent Indians. The Commission's mission was to find whether an individual was one-half Indian or not. By 1921, it had been reduced to one quarter Indian blood. In some cases, it was relaxed up to one-sixteenth ancestry.

Ward Churchill is critical of the idea of determining Native identity by blood quantum which he considers a ploy to erase the concept called Native Americas.

The thinking is simple. As the historian Patricia Nelson Limerick frames it: "Set the blood quantum at one-quarter, hold to it as a rigid definition of Indians, let intermarriage proceed as it has for centuries, and eventually Indians will be defined out of existence." Bearing out the validity of Jaimes' and Limerick's observations is the fact that, in 1900, about half of all Indians in this country were "Full-bloods." By 1990, the population had shrunk to about twenty percent.... A third of all Indians are at the quarter-blood cutoff point. Cherokee demographer Russel Thornton estimates that, given the continued imposition of purely racial definitions, Native America as a whole will have disappeared by the year 2080. (in Dirlík 11)

This is what Churchill mockingly calls "arithmetical genocide" (Dirlík 11). The intention is clear. In colonial discourse, Natives were a people without history. By 2080, if Thornton is right, there will just be a memory of Natives, a history without people. From the Native perspective, a definition other than biologism is required for Natives' survival.

The definition of 'Indian' varies from situation to situation and from region to region. But it is normally assessed in terms of a quarter blood and tribal membership. There are a few full bloods or "bloods"; more mixed-bloods whose parents come from different tribes; and most of them are half-bloods or "breeds." According to the BIA Federal Acknowledgement office criteria, for gaining official recognition a tribal group

must prove that it:

has existed since its first sustained contact with European cultures on a continuous basis to the present; that its members live in a distinct, autonomous community perceived by others as Indian; that it has maintained some sort of authority with a governing system by which its members abide; that all its members can be traced genealogically to an historic tribe. (Nagel 242)

In this formulation, emphasis was laid on historical continuity. In contrast to this rigid stand, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 defined a tribe as “any Indian tribe, organized band, pueblo, or the Indians residing on one reservation” (Nagel 242). The Census Bureau’s definition focused on self identification where as the Indian Health Service require a certain blood quantum (one-half to one-sixteenth).

James Clifford records the Mashpee trial of the late 1960s to foreground the nuances involved in the ascription of Native identity. The case was intended not to settle land ownership, but to determine Mashpees as a tribe. Many historians and anthropologists testified in the case. Jack Campisi classified five criteria to address Mashpee identity : “(1) a group of Indians, members by ascription – that is, by birth, (2) a kinship network, (3) a clear consciousness of kind – ‘we’ versus ‘they,’ (4) a territory or homeland, and (5) a political leadership” (in Clifford 319). The most remarkable thing in these five criteria is the Native consciousness of being Natives. Even though today’s Natives do not have a first hand experience of dispossession, it haunts their consciousness.

Natives’ choice of an ethnic identity erases the problem of hybridity. Though there might be only a few pure Natives left today, it does not make Native identity untenable. I have already talked about the collective resistance of Natives to Whites and vice versa. Given the radical separation between the two, Whites cannot see any difference between a full-blood and a half-blood Native. A Native cannot be authenticated by the presence of Indian blood in his body, even though it could be a determinant of Native identity. Nativism is not merely a biological given but a cultural position. A biological hybrid could be a cultural Native. Purity is a matter of individual choice, not of birth. Consciousness of being a Native validates Native identity. Native identity is a consciousness, a conviction, and a matter of individual choice that defies the empirical laboratory syndrome.

Momaday’s *The Names* is a testimony to this psychic affiliation. Momaday traces his family roots through four generations and comes to know about his great grandparents: I. J. Galyen, a White settler and Natachee, a Cherokee. Momaday’s mother, who considered herself to

be an Indian and called herself “Little Moon,” was also named Natachee. Momaday makes us believe that names and psychic affiliation play important roles in determining identity.

That dim Native heritage became a fascination and a cause for her, in as much, perhaps, as it enabled her to assume an attitude of defiance, an attitude which she assumed with particular style and satisfaction; it became her. She imagined who she was. This act of imagination was, I believe, among the most important events of my mother’s early life, as later the same essential act was to be among the most important of my own. (Momaday 25)

People become what they think themselves to be in spite of vanishing genetic proof. Indians choose to be Indians and become Indians.

True location can be both biological and psychological. This sense of location makes us experience and know the world. As Paula Moya puts it, “Identities are thus not simply products of structures of power; they are often assumed or chosen for complex subjective reasons....” (Moya 9). Every Native, apart from possessing a little percentage of Indian blood, is psychologically affiliated to a tribe and the knowledge of this location shapes the way he experiences life. Identity is both given and constructed. But this construction of Native identity is chosen, not imposed as in colonial discourse. As there are numerous tribes, there might be different strategic positions from where a Native can speak and resist. The heterogeneity of these tribes, however, does not dilute their response to the invader. Rather, it makes their struggle more enduring.

When the Cherokee population increased by 300 percent between 1970 and 1980, questions were asked about the authenticity of Cherokees identifying themselves as Cherokees. Thornton’s reply to this question is revealing.

Common to all the Cherokees is an identity as Cherokee. All of the 232,344 individuals described here—fully 17 percent of all American Indians in the United States in 1980, according to the census definition and resulting enumeration—identified themselves as Cherokee. So they are. (in Nagel 246)

Identity is a matter of how one sees oneself and how one is seen by others; one’s psychological affiliation and what one is projected to be. How we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us shape the way we see things. Clifford refers to Brian Swann who said,

The Native Americans are Native Americans if they say they are, if other Native Americans say they are and accept them, and, (possibly) if the values that are held close and acted

upon are values upheld by the various Native people who live in the Americas. (in Clifford 208)

Besides simple self identification, community identification is also necessary. What is perhaps more important than these is an identification with and participation in Native values and world-views.

The focus on discursive identity and hybridity to the exclusion of essentialism serves the colonial discourse by denying Natives identity and agency. It also does not allow Natives the formation of a 'we.' It ignores what is common within a group and forces a Native subject to act on external stimuli and be thoroughly determined by them. This subject, created in the interest of the dominant discourse, cannot resist for resistance assumes a difference from the norm. This invokes a very fundamental thought provoking question: can culture exist outside power? Yes, it can. This is not meant to be a denial of discourse to which everybody is subjected. Discourse interpellates an individual into a subject. Even though a Native is tempted to and forced to succumb to societal codes, he reworks these influences in his own way and subverts them. Culture can exist outside power as the Orient did and still does outside Orientalism.

The postmodernist displacement of identity is an act of evasion. In postmodernism, identity is an impossibility as it carries the spectre of non-identity. But Native identity is a consciousness of being within a tribe and being different and distinctive from an alien force. This affiliation, the 'we'ness, not mere biological insiderism, constitutes Native identity. The marking of difference is a strategy to rupture the hegemony that tries to turn Natives into the same. Thus, Native identity is more of a survival strategy against the workings of power. It is absolutely necessary to assert one's difference against an externally imposed definition of oneself as the other.

Discourse constitutes the subject in postmodernist theory. The constructionist approach believes in a subject different from others. The West is obsessed with isolated subjects because, as Sartre believed, "Hell is other people." But Natives have a communal rather than an individual self. Natives do not stand apart from, but participate in their community. Discursive subjects differ so much from others and from themselves that the self is reduced to a fiction of language. This fictionalizing of the self denies shared experience and cultural bonding. Radhakrishnan echoes this obsession with a self within representation when he says that there is no "immutable state of being" (Radhakrishnan 9). Conceiving of a self only within representation is not only a denial of the past, but also of agency. It is the continuation of the belief in 'the lazy Indian' who cannot resist. It is a refusal to accept Natives as an entity that ex-

isted before the invasion. The opposition to “the immutable state of being,” as Radhakrishnan maintains, is like confining and tracing nativism to after the Native contact with Whites. This confinement of Native identity can be found in Homi Bhabha’s doctriated theorizing of hybridity, when he pleads for “the impossibility of claiming an origin for the self (or other) within a tradition of representation” (Bhabha 46). Pure culture is a myth because, as Bhabha feels, true culture is to be found in the interstice. The denial of Native purity, and its manifestations in ceremonial practices today, is a kind of selective amnesia that erases the idea of a Native’s identity prior to the colonial invasion. The interstice, or Radhakrishnan’s “transethnic collectivism” or “ever expanding coalition” (Radhakrishnan 16) of cultures, is a refusal to know what happened before the fall, what life was like before language was born, and what a culture was like before it met another. For Europeans, this has always been a risky job because to assign nativism before the European contact would expose a lot of unpleasant facts. The safest way to deny that past was to confine Native identity to what Europe defined Natives to be.

As it has already been said, Natives might have accepted changes brought on by White culture, but they have always refused to assimilate. Identity within representation has connotations of assimilation, aimed at replicating civilization in an acceptable way. This is intended to make Natives internalize the White world-view and values. It means that a Native cannot exist as a Native and survive. President Rutherford Hayes once said,

Some people seem to think that God has decreed that Indians should die off like wild animals. With this, we have nothing to do. If they are to become extinct we ought to leave that to Providence.... If it turns out that their destiny is to be different, we shall have at least done our duty...to improve their physical, mental, and moral condition...(and) prepare them to become part of the Great American family. (cited in Weeks 187)

The Native had to be morally conditioned by Whites in order to be the sovereign citizen of the American family. One could not be an American and different. Cultural cross-pollination makes White culture the norm. The culture contact theory was meant to make Natives aware of their inferiority, not for creating equals. When Cherokees dissolved their tribal government in 1827 and formed a republic, their hope was to adapt to the rapid changes and coexist peacefully with Whites. But their progress aroused envy and suspicion among Whites. The whole process of civilization was not intended to produce a simultaneous and equal order,

because Natives could possibly not have been equal to Whites. The aim was, and still is, to rob Natives of their nativism.

Diana Brydon, an advocate of acculturation, justifies the impossibility of a pure cultural identity. She makes it almost mandatory for Natives to be subjected to hegemonic White practices. In spite of her claim to being sympathetic to resistance to assimilation, she provides an unambiguous threat to Native identity.

Although I can sympathize with such arguments as tactical strategies in insisting on self-definition and resisting appropriation, even tactically they prove self-defeating because they depend upon a view of cultural authenticity that condemns them to a continued marginality and an eventual death. (Brydon 140-141)

The settler mentality threatens Natives either to assimilate or to get lost. This springs from the belief of the White culture as the norm. This is based on the neutrality and justifiability of European culture and the inherent inferiority of Native cultures. Getting assimilated and becoming hybrid shows not only the fragility of Native cultures, but also the acceptance of colonialism as a welcome relief. Thorough acculturation is also an acceptance of Natives' anteriority and primitivism that can justify the colonial mission.

Confining identity to representation is an unambiguous game of power universalizing and normativizing dominant practices. But, in spite of its ubiquity, representation is not irresistible. Representation conceals the fact that things do exist in an unmediated reality prior to representation. For Whites, authentic meaning or purity does not exist, unless filtered through White ways. But nativism tries to capture that moment before mediation and resists its Western representations. However Ashcroft, like Hall, Bhabha and other champions of constructionism, refuses to accept any meaning in its unmediated reality when he says, "culture is practised, culture is used, culture is made" (Ashcroft 2). Perpetual oscillation in time and within representation constitutes culture for Ashcroft. It is indeed the White man's privilege to renew culture till it becomes indistinguishable from the White culture. This faith in cultural constructionism with a total negation of purity is a confirmation of the omnipotence of discourse and representation.

'Other' identities are tempted to relinquish their difference through myriads of ways, which sound progressive and humanist. Natives are asked to relinquish tribal loyalties and invited to be a part of the mainstream, where differences must be forgotten to create an order based on equality. This is another strategy employed by the dominant discourse to reduce, even nullify, particularisms and produce a homogeneous hu-

manity. Jeannette Armstrong mocks at this make-believe of living together for a common cause. This idea of a common cause or “we are one people” theory is an attempt to keep the past buried lest it should unsettle present ideas of equality. Slash, the protagonist of the novel of the same name, critiques the American President’s speech about a “Great Society.”

He talked about “progress without strife and change without hatred.” At the same time he also said to “reject any among us who seek to reopen old wounds and rekindle hatreds”.... I knew he talked about the blacks or any people that upset the fake idea about a “Great Society”.... How it was all like that, a fake, while really White people wished we would all either be just like them or stay out of sight. (Armstrong 36)

A defense mechanism to hide White injustice to Natives, rather than a common cause, guides the President to develop a Great Society. Natives are given two options, assimilate or get lost. Slash knows that the offer is an attempt to obliterate the difference between Natives and Whites. Natives are good as long as they subscribe to the idea of a Great Society. Going back in time and reopening old wounds would ensure Natives’ savagery.

The invitation to ‘savages’ to be human beings is a well planned strategy to conceal what Whites did to others. It means that Whites do not want to hear and respect an alternative and resistant story. But Native literature is replete with resistant stories. This is how Silko defends the implication of stories.

They are not just entertainment  
Don’t be fooled.  
They are all we have, you see  
all we have to fight off  
illness and death. (Silko 2)

These alternative stories have ethnic and racial implications, which contest White stories of Natives.

White institutions establish orders of truth and propriety. In racially motivated White discourse, Natives are made to believe and internalize what is shown to them. Slash reacts to the stereotypical portrayal of Natives in Hollywood movies that confirms the myth of Indian savagery.

Worse to watch the mock Indian raids they staged where a whole group of “helpless” wagon trainers would be burned and scalped. I wondered why they did not show things that really happened. (Armstrong 118)

Slash here exposes the way truth is made to bear ideological burdens.

Discourse is a chain of representations in which statements ideologically conducive to Whites are presented as facts. Discursive identity is a participation in the White-authored discourse. To resist that discourse, Arif Dirlik believes, there is a need to maintain “a social and cultural identity against the depredations of power” (Dirlik 11). Native identity rejects the notion of White cultural normativity, questions the making of discourse and, instead, proposes a strategic ethnic identity based on structures of attachment and solidarity.

Besides inviting Natives to be human beings, Whites either mummify and exoticize the traditional Native or congratulate an assimilated Native for being progressive. The first is directed at confining Natives to their reservations as museum pieces, which would serve as a justification for the civilizational drive. The other is self-congratulation at the success of the civilizing mission. The first Native is greeted for being a cultural custodian (“you are a real Native”) and the second for being progressive (“O, you are so different; I wish all were so”). The preference is certainly for the latter, because he is simply acted upon, without any resistance. Elizabeth Ermarth questions this kind of subjectivity when she asks, “What independent or moral life can be expected of a subjectivity controlled by systems into which it is born and over which it has little control?” (Ermarth 410).

The all-pervasive discourse cannot afford to encourage resistance. Only the privileged can talk about discursive formation, because anything other than that would be a denial of privilege or an invitation to other possible, often resistant, systems. But there are postcolonial critics like Stuart Hall, who have internalized discursive formation as the norm to the negation of essence. His popularization of this kind of subjectivity, that is, “Identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse” (Hall 4), is incompatible with Native resistance. A White man is born into a system that claims to be universal and where one has no knowledge of any alternate system. The ideas of ‘route’ and identity in process are pre-conceived plans to separate the past from the present, alienate Natives from their roots. By subjecting Natives to the play of dominant systems, Whites deny the development of a discourse that might pose a challenge to their authority. Natives are enticed to become social dupes of the dominant culture, erasing every possibility of agency.

In colonialism, Natives were not given an opportunity to assert their tribal identity since it was branded as savagery. Now it is worse; the enemy is not visible. All the more reason why Natives should affirm their cultural identity and resist its denial. Natives, who have been subjected to cultural genocide, must retain it as a survival strategy to keep the invading culture at bay. The Native subject cannot afford to subject him-

self to discourse and ideas associated with particular White institutions and their ways of establishing orders of truth and reality. Constructedness is one of the ways through which identity is influenced, but not wholly determined. In spite of being influenced by institutional codes, the Native subject can work, improve, and even unmake these influences in his own way. Thus, he avoids complete determination and proves his agency.

Natives have frustrated every attempt to disconnect them from their past and roots. Beth Brant tells a story about La Larona, the mother and grandmother of Indians. She calls the children of her blood,

“Come home, come home,” she whispers, she cries, she calls to us. She comes into that sacred place we hold inviolate. She is birthing us in that sacred place. “Come home, come home,” the voice of the umbilical, the whisper of the placenta. “Come home, come home.” (Brant 204-205)

Home is that where traditions are practiced and believed. This homecoming, which implies separation from home earlier, is the conscious construction of Native identity. And now Natives are at home.

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