Decolonizing the Academy with Subversive Acts of Indigenous Research: A Review of Yakama Rising and Bad Indians

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Centering Indigenous research in mainstream sociology is difficult at best. Native studies, in general, meet with certain resistance from Western academia and its politics of knowledge and inquiry. Western thought often deems Indigenous research as irrelevant within the construction of knowledge. Indigenous methodologies are dismissed as non-conforming, invalid, or inapplicable. Worse still, scholars (like me) who insist on using Indigenous epistemologies are often framed as combative, difficult, or ethnocentric. But ultimately, Indigenous research is not about proving its worthiness within the dominant discourse or being accepted by the academy with its centuries-old practices of colonization. Indigenous research is vital for challenging deeply embedded colonial assumptions and practices that have long constituted Native Peoples as objects of research rather than as authorities on their own lived experiences. Furthermore, the value of Indigenous research is more than knowledge production: it is about the being and the doing of that knowledge and its impact on our communities. Indigenous research is transformative. Consequently, Indigenous researchers do social research for more than the profitability of intellectual property or freedom. Indigenous research is an act of subversive resistance because the knowledge produced must be practical and applicable in our movement toward collective liberation, particularly within the academy.

In this essay, I review two books that position Indigenous people as legitimate theorists, as experts on our own lives, capable of assigning meaning and significance to our lived realities, experiences, and challenges in the ongoing struggle toward decolonization of our existence. These works do important work for Native and non-Native peoples alike. First, the books give an overview of the consequences of colonialism for all world citizens: loss of language, culture, identity, voice, and history. Next, each book provides conceptual bridges to inform the relationship between Indigenous inquiry and Western theory. Finally, each works to demystify Indigenous research with well-articulated analysis using concrete examples and rich epistemological diversity.

Yakama Rising: Indigenous Cultural Revitalization, Activism, and Healing is an insightful, perceptive ethnography. The author, Michelle M. Jacob, is an associate professor of ethnic studies and an affiliated faculty member in sociology at the University of San Diego. She is also the director of the Center for Native Health and Culture at Heritage University on the Yakama Reservation. Yakama Rising is a short book, consisting of an introduction and five chapters in just under 130 pages, that presents three case studies about the traditional dances, language, and foods of the Yakama to explore the people and processes involved in the conceptualization, teachings, and implementation of a Yakama-specific decolonizing praxis. As a culture-specific study of Indigenous activism, Jacob accomplishes a great deal with this effectively written, theoretically and methodologically rich, important work. From an insider perspective,
Jacob expands the reader’s understanding of contemporary Native communities and their struggle with decolonization. She does this by privileging the voices of a specific tribal group, the Yakama people, and using a combination of methods, including participant observation, interviews, and ethnographic reflections.

Within the discipline of Indigenous studies, the term *decolonization* generally means to first comprehend how oppressive structures of colonialism (such as individualism and patriarchy) color our everyday worlds and then to apply that knowledge in ways that disrupt colonized ways of thinking, doing, and being. Indigenous studies (also known as Native American studies) first emerged from the First Convocation of American Indian Scholars at Princeton University in March 1970. At this gathering, 200 Native scholars, activists, and students (including the likes of Vine Deloria, Jr., N. Scott Momaday, and Beatrice Medicine) called for the development of an academic discipline that was developed by Indigenous intellectuals and that centered on Indigenous cultures and tribal sovereignty, while simultaneously accomplishing the decolonization of the educational system. To accomplish the goal of decolonization, the scholars called for an interdisciplinary body of Indigenous knowledge that no longer focuses on Native Peoples as “exotic others” but rather uses this knowledge to influence U.S. Indian policy.

According to Jacob, cultural revitalization functions as a decolonizing practice. That is, Jacob argues that the Yakama people use cultural revitalization as both resistance and healing, often resulting in their unknowing participation in social activism. *Yakama Rising* goes beyond the analysis of Indigenous victimization to show how communities use traditional cultural practices to dismantle oppressive systems. Jacob effectively argues that “the power needed to heal our soul wounds already exists within our people and traditions” (p. 12). As a Yakama person, Jacob occupies the intimate position of insider and recounts that perspective through autoethnographic accounts. As an Indigenous scholar, Jacob shares the responsibility of research with the entire community. Altogether, she successfully relates a local cultural-historical specificity to the research, exposing the ways the Yakama people have resisted the external forces of more than 200 years of colonization; and even though the subject matter is complex and multifaceted, Jacob’s writing makes it extremely accessible. Indigenous studies and postcolonial studies have produced a growing body of literature about the reclamation of culture and examples of decolonization. Jacob contributes to this literature by linking the study of macro processes of social and cultural contexts with micro-level processes of daily interactions in a relational and holistic inquiry.

Jacob’s first case study examines how affirming, nurturing spaces within public schools demonstrate “how indigenous peoples are reshaping educational institutions to move from dependence to autonomy” (p. 20). Within the Wapato Indian Club, Yakama and non-Yakama students learn common Yakama values of humble leadership, cultural pride, an understanding of cultural identity, and a sense of self by means of the elders who teach and guide them. Jacob contends that these experiences result in the youth “gaining voice” and a cultural understanding that is rooted in spiritual awareness—an interconnectedness of the physical, social, and spiritual. The second case study directly links the loss of language to settler-colonial violence by recounting the struggles faced by Indigenous Peoples in the face of federal policies “designed to destroy Native languages, cultures, and peoples” (p. 49). Jacob notes that the most destructive factors in language loss by way of colonialism are “the devaluing of elders in contemporary indigenous societies” and the scarcity of resources available for language revitalization (p. 52). The narratives within this case study reveal a shared communal belief in an intergenerational responsibility to build a moral community. The third and final case study explores a grassroots organization that works to teach and keep Yakama food traditions and the struggles encountered to find funding and volunteers. According to Jacob, a model of cultural revitalization emerges through the narratives of the activists. This model highlights women’s roles as culture bearers and spiritual teachers, and the faith, humility, and flexibility essential for the “grassroots empowerment for intergenerational teaching and learning of place-based teachings” to dismantle colonial logics (p. 102).

Jacob accomplishes a rare feat in the field of Indigenous research by pushing past the typical analysis of historical trauma inflicted on Indigenous Peoples by settler-colonialism to explore the power of community resilience. Jacob provides examples of the Yakama’s cultural revitalization while contextually relating the historically destructive and genocidal force of colonialism against Indigenous Peoples. In doing so, Jacob uses the past as a bridge to a present space of healing. Jacob’s work illustrates the interconnectedness of healing and social change through stories about perseverance,
transition, and adaptation on the Yakama Reservation, located in present-day Washington State. Jacob presents settler-colonial violence (e.g., land loss, genocide, warfare, Indian boarding schools, cultural appropriation, negative stereotypes) against the Yakama as factual, using examples of political and social injustices without a tone of anger or bitterness and using simple terms without angst or argument, indeed, as background information in the examination of the Yakama’s ability to adapt. For example, when recounting how the U.S. government forced the Yakama leaders to sign the Treaty of 1855, which ceded 90 percent of the Yakama homeland, Jacob highlights the fact that “our Yakama leaders retained 1.2 million acres” and gives further praise for the Yakama leaders’ retention of “traditional food rights” (p. 7).

It is within this contextual, clarifying space that the book provides an emerging theory of Indigenous social change by way of critical pedagogy, intergenerational resistance, language revitalization, and spiritual awareness. A significant contribution of this work is the articulation of Jacob’s Yakama decolonizing praxis: a “theory-method” that recognizes an Indigenous critical pedagogy, the social justice of a moral community, and grassroots Indigenous resistance as activism (p. 107). Some may criticize Jacob for a lack of engagement with other decolonizing literature or for a seemingly simplistic colonial critique, but I find these potential critiques unfounded because such engagements were never the goal of the book. Instead, Jacob writes as a member of her own community and uses reflexivity and her narratives to illustrate the interconnectivity between decolonizing theory and Indigenous methods that is required for the development of decolonizing praxis: the habitual practice of disrupting colonized thinking, doing, and/or being. Consequently, Jacob’s impressive contribution spans numerous disciplines, including Indigenous epistemologies, human rights, ethnic studies, feminist studies, social justice, qualitative methodologies, decolonization, and social movements.

Deborah Miranda also uses decolonizing frameworks in her book, Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir. Miranda is a full professor of English at the Washington and Lee University, teaching courses cross-listed with women’s studies and other ethnic studies programs because of the interdisciplinary nature of her work. Miranda’s stated goal is an effort to “tell the story” of the violent missionization of California and, in doing so, to challenge the dominant narrative that the Ohlone/Costanoan-Eselen people (one of the many California tribes referred to as “Mission Indians”) are extinct. Miranda’s extensive research spans the late eighteenth century to the present, examining the structures of settler-colonialism and their ongoing effects. To achieve this, Miranda uses a mosaic of short essays, poetry, journal entries, personal reflections, newspaper clippings, oral histories, photos, storytelling, narratives by historical figures, and anthropological recordings to document the history of the California missions that enslaved California Indian tribes and the intergenerational pathology of violence that followed. Miranda thoroughly examines the relationship between historical trauma on a community and the experiences of abuse on individuals.

Using memoir as a space to grieve the historical trauma of colonialism, Miranda contributes to decolonizing literatures and Indigenous epistemologies and builds on survivance and resistance theories. Furthermore, by using memoir as methodology, Miranda disrupts the colonization of academic knowledge production by challenging the rigid scholarly tradition that posits scientific method as the only legitimate inquiry. Miranda writes, “Story is the most powerful force in the world—in our world, maybe in all the worlds. Story is culture” (p. xvi). Miranda had heard only one story about Mission Indians, about the Ohlone/Costanoan-Eselen Nation of California, about her father’s people, about her people: Indians were “godless, dirty, stupid, primitive, ugly, passive, drunken, immoral, lazy, weak-willed people who might make good workers if properly trained and motivated. What kind of story is that?” (p. xvi). Bad Indians represents Miranda’s decades-long search for their story/her story, their culture/her culture.

This book is not an easy read: it is brutal, honest, raw, compelling, haunting, and chilling. Each page requires the reader to expand her understanding of the brutality of colonialism from an open-minded, open-hearted, Indigenous-feminist perspective. Miranda draws out the connections between the violence of the California missions, the violence perpetrated by her family, and her own rape. Through the study of enslaved Indians within the California mission projects, she reveals the interlocking effects of colonialism, patriarchy, internalized oppression, and the historical trauma that results in intergenerational suffering. But Miranda’s real goal is to “end the Mission Fairy Tale” because it “has not just killed us, it has taught us to kill ourselves and kill each other with alcohol, domestic violence, horizontal racism, internalized hatred” (p. xix). Ultimately, Miranda
constructs the story of the origin, history, and consequences of the missionization of California through disparate, multifaceted voices that contradict the dominant discourse—replacing it with stories of survival and resistance.

_Bad Indians_ is structured in four major parts that recount centuries of violence, danger, survival, and hope. Following the timeline of the missionization of her family, Miranda links past brutalities with present traumas by interweaving poetry, letters to ancestors, and encyclopedia-like entries along with her family’s oral histories. The collection illustrates how the voices of the enslaved peoples and Spanish slave master padres have been substituted with myths of happy, simple Indian workers and benevolent priests. Conversely, Miranda details the rape, beatings, forced conversion, and other torture used to coerce the Indians to submit to slavery or die.

This first part, “The End of the World: Missionization, 1776–1836,” opens with a “genealogy of violence” that connects current-day rates of incarceration and suicide to the violence used by Spanish soldiers and poverty, homelessness, and internalized racism rates to the land theft and paternalism perpetrated by the Catholic Church. Miranda creates a “Mission Glossary” that redefines common terms used during that era, terms like flogging, cudgel, and cat-o’-nine-tails. Miranda provides illustrations of the tools used to discipline the Indians. Miranda also uses sarcasm to emphasize the lies told by the dominant culture’s imagined history, revealing its ridiculousness: “Records indicate that some Indians received as many as one hundred twenty-five blows at one time. Those must have been very bad Indians, as the padres did not want to injure the Indians but teach them to behave” (p. 13). Miranda writes in both the voices of Mission Indians to describe the brutality of their situation and of the priests who express their contempt for the Indigenous cultures they despise. At the end of the section, Miranda describes how mothers died to protect their children, and how her own father abuses her brother.

The second part, “Bridges: Post-Secularization, 1836–1900,” tells of how Miranda’s people survived forced acculturation through the mechanisms of identity-denial and resistance. Miranda explains that lies were told to protect the children from being known as Indian; lies hide cultures but save lives—clothes tell the lies; names tell the lies; and most importantly, silence keeps the lies in place to protect a people so that descendants can someday find the truth of the lost culture’s dances, songs, and language. Miranda’s poetry, created from newspaper stories of that time, reveals the horrific racism that California Indians lived under. One in particular, from the _San Francisco Bulletin_, dated May 12, 1859, recounts how an “old Indian and his squaw” had three ferocious dogs set upon them “for fun” and “the squaw” died shortly after (p. 59). Because she was just an Indian, no police action was taken.

“The Light from the Carissa Plains: Reinvention, 1900–1961” brings the identity of being California Indian back to Miranda through her grandfather’s voice on cassette tapes. She hears the truth of the loss of language, culture, land, and kinship on these tapes. Miranda tells stories about homelands that her people occupied before dispossession and her own blood-memory of those places. Identity construction and reclamation are deeply intertwined in her connection to the spaces her grandfather and her grandfather’s grandfather occupied. Through the stories of her grandfather, Miranda asserts a similar connection between them to create a new identity tied to place. Dominant discourses of knowing do not recognize the theory of memory through bodily longing. But Miranda uses blood-memory as an act of survival and resistance to the dominant narrative of what is true, what is knowable, and what is real. Miranda contends that the loss of land is soul wounding for Indigenous Peoples, amounting to an “intergenerational trauma with the accompanying loss of self-respect and self-esteem” (p. 202). There is a large literature that links loss of land with the loss of identity and history, compounding the historical trauma suffered by Indigenous Peoples.

Finally, “Teheyapami Achiska: Home, 1961–Present” brings the trauma full circle as Miranda tells her stories of violence, betrayal, parental abandonment, and healing. In doing so, the “girl without a mother” speaks back to the original violence and acts of colonization that “broke the world, broke our hearts, broke the connection between soul and flesh” (p. 123). Ultimately, Miranda argues that the communal process of decolonizing the history about California Indians induces communal healing (p. 194). This case successfully relates a global perspective of colonialism against a local cultural-historical specificity of Indigenous life. By recounting the social, historical, and legal circumstances leading to the missionization of California, Miranda provides foundational knowledge to facilitate an understanding of the victimization of Mission Indians and the subsequent effects of generations of internalized oppression and historical trauma.
As common to other Indigenous research, the stories in *Bad Indians* function outside Western ideas of linear time. This might make it difficult reading for those who have had little exposure to research inquiries outside of the dominant discourse; but it is worth the effort. Miranda uses multiple perspectives to deconstruct colonial histories and replace them with stories based on tradition, memory, and ancestral knowledge that privilege the roles of Indigenous Peoples in the narrative, which results in building theories of identity. Miranda connects the past with the present so that future generations can create their own ways of knowing in continuity with the stories. She reconstructs the past with stories that embody survival and resistance. Through these stories, Indigenous Peoples disrupt and challenge the violent narratives of colonialism—narratives that name, stereotype, and define Native Peoples within dominant power structures while concurrently making them invisible. Indigenous people remain visible and culturally autonomous through their stories. Miranda argues that cultural identity cannot be maintained when others are narrating stories about Native Peoples:

Culture is ultimately lost when we stop telling the stories of who we are, where we have been, how we arrived here, what we once knew, what we wish we knew; when we stop our retelling of the past, our imagining of the future, and the long, long task of inventing an identity every second of our lives. (p. xiv)

Furthermore, story as theory-making is a decolonizing project that challenges colonial paradigms by providing an Indigenous perspective. In sum, *Bad Indians* is simply remarkable.

Indigenous research embodies the struggle of occupying space in a colonizing, patriarchal space as it challenges mainstream research by exposing the assumptions of colonial research—no matter how unsettling—that enable racism, injustice, and the silencing of Indigenous voices. The works by Jacob and Miranda are but two examples of Indigenous research that engage in processes of critical reflection within tribal-specific research. Their voices reflect and document the progression of decolonizing work within the academy. Indigenous research reveals the possibilities for meaningful participation by Native people in knowledge production and for non-Native people to productively engage in dismantling entrenched settler-colonialism. But there is still work to do.

Social science still resists the inclusion of Indigenous scholarship and research within the academy, which, in essence, denies the lived social realities of Native Peoples. But Indigenous research matters for traditional sociological inquiry because without it all findings are incomplete. Western domination has unabatedly demanded both cultural and structural changes for Indigenous Peoples. By collapsing hundreds of distinct cultures into one group, Europeans othered Indigenous Peoples as “Indians,” and the United States continued this practice. Federal Indian policy tenaciously pursued the destruction of Indigenous traditional life ways for almost 200 years. Indigenous Peoples endured forced removal and relocation to desolate and economically deprived reservations, and required participation in formal Westernized education and Christian religions. Federal legislation produced an ongoing economic dependency for tribes and individuals within a capitalist economy, and federal courts upheld these laws. Assimilation measures attempted to eliminate traditional political systems, kinship structures, communal and migratory economic relationships, and religious practices of Native Peoples. It is within these brutal histories that Indigenous research finds both the realities of settler-colonial violence and the resilience and survival of Indigenous communities. Consequently, Indigenous research makes important contributions to the academy and brings healing to the soul wounds of Indigenous communities.