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Critique of Anthropology 2002 22: 445

DOI: 10.1177/0308275X020220040401

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Objectifying the Past

Lakota Responses to Western Historiography

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Abstract ■ This article discusses an emergent indigenous counter-discourse on Lakota (Sioux) Indian history. This discourse challenges the widely accepted narrative of Lakota history that sets their date of arrival in the Black Hills of South Dakota in the 18th century. Modern Lakota historians maintain that the Lakotas have always been in the sacred Black Hills and that the conventional narrative of the Lakota past serves to legitimize their displacement. From a perspective inspired by the writings of Michel Foucault this article argues that, although this discourse can be seen as reflecting an attempt to regain a privileged position of defining Lakota history and identity, it also reproduces the very logic of modern 'grand narratives'. Lakota oral tradition, however, is based on a fundamentally different logic from modern historiography, and it is here, the article suggests, that a more fundamental form of resistance is maintained.

Keywords ■ discourse ■ Lakota history ■ Lakota Indians ■ representations ■ resistance

In this article I discuss the increasingly vocal indigenous representations of Lakota (Sioux) history that constitute a challenge to conventional historical representations. The Lakotas' attempt to re-appropriate the privilege to define their historical roots is simultaneously an attempt to regain the privilege to define their identity. For more than a century, Lakotas and other North American Indian nations have been turned into a projection of Western fantasies and fears by Western popular culture, missionaries and writers. The Native cultural 'revival' evident since the 1960s has partly been an attempt to regain control over representations of Indian life. As such, alternative representations of tribal histories and origins fit into the broad category of Indian resistance. In this article I do not imply that such an interpretation is incorrect, but rather wish to scrutinize critically the logic of one particular indigenous historical representation, namely that concerning the Lakotas' relationship to the Black Hills. I will do so from a perspective inspired by Michel Foucault, and in particular his notion that even resistance to domination is forever bound to be couched in terms reproducing the very logic of domination. According to Foucault, discourse is not preceded by its object. Rather, discourse *creates* its own objects. For example, in his famous analysis of the history of sexuality (1978), Foucault sees it as a form of social classification and

**CRITIQUE of
ANTHROPOLOGY**

Vol 22(4) 445–460 [0308-275X(200212)22:4; 445–460;029009]

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(London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)

an object of knowledge, and the result of increasingly systematic attempts to translate behavior, emotions and practices into discourse. In our attempts to categorize, control and understand phenomena, we *create* them as controllable units. The categories which lock people and phenomena in place are not only oppressive, 'from above', but are reproduced in every quarter: 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault, 1978: 93). Power is not only repressive but also enabling, but it enables only on its own terms and conditions.¹

I will argue here that the emergent new Lakota historiography reproduces the very logic and structure of a Western 'grand narrative' although it challenges its contents. As such, this emergent historiography fits neatly into Foucault's somewhat claustrophobic formulation that 'Where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power' (Foucault, 1978: 95). When one specific form of discourse gains dominance, it subsumes local discourses and reproduces itself in them. I believe it is fairly uncontroversial to claim that the dominant discourse of the late modern age is the scientific, rational one. Once this form of discourse gains the upper hand, discourses based on a fundamentally different logic tend to become encompassed by it. In his discussion about the history of religion as a concept in Western society, Tambiah notes that 'It is essentially in the modern period, since Enlightenment, that a particular conception of religion that emphasizes its cognitive, intellectual, doctrinal and dogmatic aspects, gained prominence' (1990: 4). Here, then, is an instance of a 'spill-over effect' whereby religion becomes an instance of the scientific logic rather than a powerful alternative to it. I shall try to convince the reader that the new Lakota historiography, in a similar fashion, reproduces the logic of Western historiography rather than provides an alternative to it. This is in no way an attempt to belittle the efforts and theories of emergent Lakota historians. Rather, their attempt to redefine the Lakota past bears witness to the very fact that power indeed is enabling, and also bears testimony to the Lakotas' continuing creative genius in appropriating the tools of the Whites to further their own agendas. However, I do think it's worth taking a closer look at yet another narrative form that I would argue represents a truly alternative way of representing history, not only in terms of content but in terms of logic. This alternative narrative structure and logic is to be found, I suggest, in Indian oral tradition. I would further propose that the fundamental difference between this oral tradition and both Western and emergent indigenous historiography lies in their fundamentally differing notions of 'truth'. Whereas modern historiography (both Western and Lakota) is based on a specific notion of *objective* truth with reference to which it claims legitimacy, oral tradition finds legitimacy in a notion of moral truth.

Narratives on Lakota history

The Black Hills is a densely forested area in western South Dakota that is of the utmost spiritual significance to Lakota people. The area was illegally seized by the US government in 1877, and the loss of the Black Hills has remained an enduring grievance among the Lakotas ever since.

I shall present a brief summary of the two conflicting versions of the history of the Lakotas in the Black Hills. These 'versions' of history are summaries of two clusters of thematically related stories differing from each other in their interpretation of the Lakotas' relationship to the Black Hills. Superficially, the conflict regards the approximate date of the Lakotas' arrival in the area. The implications of the conflicting truth claims, however, are far-reaching for the current Black Hills claim.² Broadly speaking, Lakota advocates for the return of the Black Hills argue that the Lakotas have 'always' been in the area, whereas most White historians agree that the Lakotas are fairly recent immigrants. After having presented these versions, I shall turn to the basic premises that these versions must share in order to have come into conflict at all. The object of my discussion is thus not Lakota history as such, but rather the discourse that has created it as an object of knowledge and control.

Narrative 1: a saga of westward expansion

This is a version of Lakota history that is widely accepted by a majority of historians and anthropologists, as well as by some Lakotas. It is a history of westward migration and of the Lakotas constantly expanding their territories by conquest.

By the beginning of the 16th century the Lakotas, and their close allies the Dakotas and the Nakotas, constituted *Oceti Sakowin* (the Seven Campfires), a loose federation of Sioux-speaking peoples, on the headwaters of the Mississippi River. The confederation is by some regarded as a historical reality (see, for example, Powers, 1977), whereas others argue that the assumption that the Seven Council Fires 'actually existed is unsupported by historical documents of earlier times' (DeMallie in Walker, 1982: 11). The fact that the traditional enemies of the Sioux, the Cree and the Chippewa, had acquired guns through trade with the French, resulted in the gradual expulsion of the Sioux from their homelands. Bands of Lakotas, the westernmost division of the Sioux, crossed the Missouri in the 1700s, at which time they also acquired horses. They reached the Black Hills around 1775. The area, which became the geographical center of Lakota territories, was invested with deep symbolic significance. The tribes living in the Black Hills at the time, among them the Crow, the Kiowa-Apache and the Kiowa, were displaced. Partly as a result of the establishment of Fort William (later renamed Fort Laramie), bands of Lakotas, most notably the Oglalas, expanded their territory further west between 1834 and 1841. The Oglalas became frequent visitors and traders at the post. The Cheyenne and the

Arapahoes, who had previously claimed the area around the fort, were now forced south to the Arkansas. The Pawnees, who had lived on the Great Plains at least since the 1200s, were under constant attack from the Lakotas and other nomadic tribes. Further to the west, the Shoshones stood in the way of Lakota expansion, and the tribes started warring with each other. The Crow, who lived in the Powder River country in northern Wyoming and southern Montana, lost much of their land to the Lakotas all through the 1860s.

During the same period, hostilities between the Lakotas and the Whites erupted in 'Red Cloud's War'. During the war, the military forts that had been established to protect travelers on their way to the gold fields in Montana along the 'Bozeman Trail' were under permanent attack. As the road through Lakota territory became too costly to maintain – both in terms of human lives and military expenses – it was closed and the forts abandoned. The war officially ended when the Fort Laramie Treaty was signed in 1868. It established 'the Great Sioux reservation' and guaranteed the Lakotas the right to most of the territory they claimed. This territory included areas that the Lakotas only in the few decades – and even years – preceding the treaty had conquered from a number of other tribes. Under the treaty, the Lakotas were to be provided with annuities, education and allotments whenever they so wished. Many historians (e.g. Hyde, 1976) have argued that the Lakotas were not only completely excluded from designing the terms of the treaty, but that they had no understanding of its terms. The Fort Laramie Treaty was not a 'victory' for the Indians, but rather an important step towards putting them under government control and supervision.

The United States did not for a moment consider itself defeated. On the contrary, that the nation could swallow its pride and enter into a magnanimous peace reflected how small a threat it considered the Sioux. To an ever increasing degree, the government regarded the plains tribes as it had long since regarded the eastern Indians – as wards of the nation, to be pitied and protected. (Lazarus, 1991: 51)

When White gold diggers in the middle of the 1870s invaded the Black Hills, the Great Sioux War of 1876 started and resulted in the defeat of General Custer at the battle of the Little Bighorn on 25 June 1876. Within a few years, however, a majority of the Lakotas had been forced to give up arms and come to the agencies, partly as a result of military campaigns, but mostly as a result of starvation. By the beginning of the 1880s practically all Lakotas lived on reservations.

The conclusions different historians, anthropologists and South Dakotans (politicians and others) draw from this version differ. Many conclude that the Lakotas' claims to aboriginal title to the Black Hills and the surrounding area are based on very shaky empirical grounds indeed. They arrived in the Black Hills probably less than a hundred years before

the Whites did, and were just as expansionist. The treaty obligations have been fulfilled many times over by the government. The Black Hills Claim fosters unrealistic hopes in many Lakota people for a quick and easy way out of poverty. In the words of Lazarus:

As for the Sioux, the claims process has encouraged them to evade any real responsibility for repairing the tragic conditions of their lives. They have come to believe that their status as victims, their sense of grievance, is their greatest source of strength and only hope for unity. And in this belief the Sioux have abandoned any meaningful attempt to control their own destiny in favor of rhetorical claims to sovereignty and independence. (1991: 428)

Narrative 2: the 'here first' story

This version claims that the Black Hills is the birthplace of the Lakotas, or that they have resided in the area since time immemorial. According to one of my consultants, the Lakotas are 'the Red Star people' who came to the Black Hills from the stars about 60 million years ago. Although they did not have a human form at the time, they were still an *oyate*, a nation. Others claim that the Lakotas were born in the caves (according to some versions, the Wind Cave) of the Black Hills themselves, in a place called Wamaka Og'naka Icante, the 'heart of everything that is'. Proponents of this view insist 'as a matter of historical fact that far from migrating from Minnesota, the Sioux had lived in the Hills for at least 10,000 years and had spread out from there' (Lazarus, 1991: 417). According to Robert Gay, former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College:

The history of the Oglala Lakota Oyate (people) is a controversial subject which continues to be hotly debated by non-Indian historians and traditional Lakota people. The most popular scenario advanced by non-Indian historians is that of westward migration. According to their theories, the Sioux left the eastern woodlands sometime in the mid 1500s. This theory may be true for some tribes such as the Dakota Santee; however there is little scientific data to support the theory of the Oglala Lakota Oyate ever having lived on the eastern seaboard. The Oglala Lakota Oyate were called 'Tetonwan' by their eastern cousins meaning 'dwellers on the prairie'. Lakota oral traditions and winter counts place them in the Black Hills region around 900 A.D. According to the Battiste Good winter count [. . .] [t]he Lakota Oyate were given the sacred pipe by the Sacred White Buffalo Woman in the Black Hills region in 900 A.D. (Gay, 1992: 2)

In April 1993, archeologists began excavating a site in the western Black Hills and found artifacts that could be up to 9000 years old. Among these were projectile points and stone tools. The tribal or linguistic affiliation of these historic hunters could not be determined. However, Charlotte Black Elk, a leading proponent for the 'here first' version of Lakota history, claimed that archeologists and other professionals 'refuse' to acknowledge

that the Lakotas have a long history. In an interview in *Indian Country Today* (8 July 1993) she said that, '[a] lot of that is the whole prejudice that the Sioux migrated. That way they can justify stealing land by saying these people stole land. They don't want to say these people were here a long time'. She then recounts segments of the Lakota creation myth:

[O]ur oral tradition tells us we used to be the P'te [buffalo] people – simple people who lived from day to day, hunted in the area, and our stories say we knew God and feared God and lived very short lives and lived in caves. And then when Tokahe [First Man] left the cave he took up the leaf of the Cottonwood tree as his design for his home – the tipi covering. And those people were the Ikce ['ordinary', 'natural'], and then the way you can distinguish those people is the P'te had very large arrowheads without a defined shaft.³

The Black Hills were thus never conquered by the Lakotas, they were born there.

A number of thematically related theories challenging Western historiography have emerged among Indian intellectuals during the past decade. Some of these challenge the whole notion of the Indians as originating in Asia and immigrating across a land bridge at Bering Strait some 30,000 years ago. According to one of my Lakota consultants, it was the other way around. It was the Indians who crossed the Bering Strait from America to Asia, and the Asians are the descendents of these Indians. The Indians also traveled further east where, among other things, they made the famous cave paintings in central Europe. Tim Giago, editor of *Indian Country Today*, refers to 'new archeological evidence'⁴ which suggests that modern man appeared in the Americas as early as 170,000 years ago, which could then place the biblical 'Garden of Man' in the Americas (1984: 92). More recently, Vine Deloria again questions the 'land bridge theory' in a book titled *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (1995).

When the Whites arrived on the Great Plains, so the Lakota version continues, the Lakotas pitied them and took care of them, but the Whites showed no gratitude in return. Rather, more and more came and killed off the buffalo, cut down the timber and more or less forced the Lakotas to take up arms against them. Red Cloud's war, which was in defense of traditional Lakota lands, resulted in a victory. The 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty confirmed the national sovereignty of the Lakotas. A number of testimonies taken up in December of 1974 during the 'Sioux Treaty Hearing' in Lincoln, Nebraska and compiled in *The Great Sioux Nation* (R.D. Ortiz, 1977), point to the importance and sacredness the Lakotas accord the treaty. Said Francis He Crow:

The Treaty was between two nations, the Sioux Nation and the United States. Before the Sioux signed it they used the Pipe and talked to the gods through this Pipe and peace was to be forever [...] My grandfather told me that the

seven council fires each take census. They cut the willow and put it there and do a ceremony and prayers. When they make an agreement, if any member does not agree, they withdraw their stick and they count. This comes from law back thousands of years. This is the Sioux Nation power. The chief cannot sign any agreement without the members. The seven stars is the set of their laws, so when they make it law, it is just like a star and it is going to be forever. (R.D. Ortiz, 1977: 137)

According to Leonard Crow Dog, 'The Treaty today is the foundation on which the Indian people now stand. We made a stand. It's what traditional people think today of the 1868 treaty' (R.D. Ortiz, 1977: 41).

One of my Lakota friends once told me that the 1868 treaty not only established a bond between the Whites and the Lakotas, but also with *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Spirit. The presence of the Sacred Pipe in signing the treaty made it a sacred, rather than merely a political, compact. The Black Hills are thus only in White possession in a superficial sense. In their own eyes and in the eyes of the Creator, the Lakotas are the true owners of the Black Hills, irrespective of the present state of affairs. According to the same man, the design of the treaty was drawn up by the Lakota leaders and he called it 'the first social development program' in the United States. Thus the Lakotas designed a model on which the whole American welfare system is based.

The Whites broke the treaty. The loss of the Black Hills in 1877 resulted from a breach of article twelve according to which any change in the terms of the treaty must be consented to by at least three-quarters of the adult male Lakota population.

Ever since the loss of the Black Hills, all through the reservation period and up to this day, the Lakotas have received nothing from the government. Housing, education, food stamps, rations, etc. are just payments for land. This view has been continuously present among the Lakotas for more than a century. For example, already in 1879 – two years after the taking of the Black Hills – Red Cloud told the newly appointed Agent McGillycuddy: 'The White man owes us a living for the lands he has taken from us' (Olson, 1975: 266).

In sum, the Lakotas are and have always been a sovereign nation born in the Black Hills. Their claims to the area are based not only on history, but also on a sacred design that has placed them on this particular spot in the world. Being Lakota is being a specific kind of human being, defined by a set of relations to specific places. Lakota spirituality – the very expression of those relationships – is tied to certain places, most importantly some sites in the Black Hills. The Black Hills Claim is not about quick money or about evading responsibility for the life of the people, but about the survival of the people as a whole.

'The discourse on truth' and Lakota oral tradition

These two conflicting representations of Lakota history with specific reference to the Black Hills should not simply be understood in terms of Native vs. non-Native perspectives. To begin with, they are partly in agreement with each other. Although version 2 has very few non-Lakota proponents, version 1, or at least parts of it, has quite a few adherents among Lakotas as well as among a majority of non-Native historians. Although certain elements in version 2 are certainly difficult to accept, others raise interesting questions about many aspects of early Lakota history that remain unanswered. The question posed here is not which version is true and which is not, but rather why they have emerged and come into conflict. One answer would seem to be obvious: the versions conflict because they tell two different and incompatible versions of the same historical sequence. If one version is true, the other is of necessity untrue.

At this point we shall have to take a brief look at the concept of truth as it pertains to this discourse on history. The conventional notion of a socially disembedded (i.e. objective) truth as the basis for relevant knowledge is fairly new in both Western and Lakota thought. This notion bestows upon science the duty to detect truth, irrespective of social and other relationships. Since the truth is 'out there' – outside the social and cultural – it is morally neutral and so is the quest for it. This view of truth and the quest of scientific inquiry has been seriously challenged from a number of quarters. Perhaps more than anybody else, Michel Foucault brought to our attention the political (in a broad sense) dimension of the very process of defining what can be made into an object of knowledge and what cannot. Truth, in the morally decontextualized sense, is ultimately based on a separation between cultural products and cultural producers (see Friedman, 1992: 205). Objectivity assumes, indeed takes for granted, the possibility of a world without relations, that is, of a separation between subject and object. This dualism replaces the notion of *aspects* with the notion of separate and unrelated *objects*. This postulated autonomy of the scientific mind (the subject) in relation to that which is to be known (the object), is a prerequisite for 'objective', scientific knowledge. Science is, ideally, morally and culturally detached and its mission is to find the truth and to leave the assessment of possible social and moral consequences to others. If one does not accept this dualism, truth cannot be found, or rather – truth, as a decontextualized object – becomes irrelevant. Friedman summarizes the Western notions of history as based on the following premises:

1. The truth is singular. There is but one true version of the past.
2. The past consists of an arbitrarily chosen segment of a temporal continuum ending with the present moment.
3. The structure attributed to this past is the product of a specific kind of research carried out by those competent in the field.

4. This structure is objective and corresponds to proposition 1, that is, it is singular.
5. All other structures or interpretations attributed to the past are, by implication, ideological in the sense of misrepresentations. The 'native's point of view' is thus a mere folk model that is the royal road, perhaps, to the native unconscious, to the deep structures of the alien culture, but is never of any scientific value as defined in terms of the above paradigm. (Friedman, 1994: 137–8)

In the 13 December 1996 issue of *The Times Literary Supplement*, Paul Boghossian, Professor of Philosophy at New York University, gives voice to this perspective. In discussing the contradictory claims of the creation myth of the Zuni (an Indian people in the Southwest) and the Land Bridge Theory, Boghossian critiques the 'postmodernists' for arguing 'that both claims can be true because both are true relative to some perspective or other, and there can be no question of truth outside of perspectives' (1996: 15). This claim, argues Boghossian, is nonsensical:

[T]o say that some claim is true according to some perspective sounds simply like a fancy way of saying that someone, or some group, believes it. The crucial question concerns what we are to say when what I believe – what's true according to my perspective – conflicts with what you believe – what's true according to your perspective? The one thing not to say, it seems to me, on pain of utter unintelligibility, is that both claims are true. (1996: 15)

Boghossian criticizes the 'postmodernist' counter-argument that the Zuni myth may be 'just as valid' and serves 'symbolic, emotional and ritual purposes' rather than descriptive ones, on the grounds that 'it's irrelevant to the issue at hand' (1996: 15). The argument about validity, states Boghossian, 'couldn't help advance the cause of postmodernism' since, if the myth is seen as 'a descriptively accurate account of prehistory, its existence has no prospect of casting any doubt on the objectivity of the account delivered by science' (1996: 15).

The issue that Boghossian defines as 'irrelevant' is precisely what is of relevance in trying to understand history as a sociocultural product embedded in political circumstances. (And this is what I believe anthropologists should be interested in.) I agree with Friedman when he critiques much of anthropology and academic history for:

... debunking the others' representations of themselves on the basis of a presumed monopoly of the *truth*. But the *truth* is quite beside the point here and merely accentuates the ethnocentricity of even the most relativist of anthropologists. Instead, one must ask where the attraction lies in making such histories. (1992: 197)

Boghossian could still, of course, argue that the question of 'attraction' (however interesting it may be to an anthropologist) is beside the point of detecting the truth. There is, as he claims, a truth irrespective of

perspective. This, I believe, is nonsense. Two examples will hopefully serve to prove my point.

In October 1991, I participated in the Plains Indian Seminar in Cody, Wyoming. The theme of the conference dealt with the effects of the Ghost Dance on Plains Indian art. One presentation was by a Shoshone Indian who talked about the Ghost Dance as it is performed today among his people. The dance, he explained, is organized around twelve successive songs. After a while, a White man in the audience stood up and asked for how long, approximately, a Ghost Dance lasts. 'It lasts twelve songs', the Indian reiterated. As the White man was not satisfied with the answer he now specified his question: 'Well, say you start dancing at seven o'clock in the morning, when are you through?' 'We are through when we have finished all twelve songs', the Indian replied.

The second example is described by Toelken who, in the 1950s, was adopted by a Navajo family in southern Utah. In order to impress his adopted father – 'an eighty- or ninety-year-old man [...] who had never seen a paved road or a train' – Toelken showed him a two-page spread of the Empire State Building in *Life*. 'His question was, immediately, "how many sheep will it hold?"' (Toelken, 1976: 12–13).

Clearly, the White man's question in the first example is just as absurd as the Navajo man's is in the second. In both cases the persons posing the questions address a phenomenon poorly known to them, and this lack of cultural competence is reflected in the lack of aptness in their questions. It is apparently as absurd from the Shoshone man's perspective to ask for the duration of the Ghost Dance in terms of hours and minutes as it is from Toelken's perspective to inquire about the size of the Empire State Building in terms of sheep. In both cases, the individuals posing the questions ask for the 'truth' about the phenomenon in question. It is certainly possible for a White spectator to measure the duration of the Ghost Dance in terms of hours and minutes, just as it is at least theoretically possible to measure the size of the Empire State Building in terms of how many sheep it can hold. The production of truth is thus directly related to the questions asked. Measurements of, say, the size of the Empire State Building will come in conflict only if they are based on the same standards (number of sheep, square-feet, height, etc.) and therefore answer the same questions. Boghossian erroneously assumes that the Land Bridge Theory and the Zuni creation myth answer the same questions. They do not, and therefore cannot be contradictory. However, when one discourse becomes dominant, its very form of inquiry and production of truth will be reproduced by subordinate ones. This is what is happening when, for example, Christian fundamentalists maintain that the biblical creation story addresses the same issues as science does, or when the logic of Western historiography is reproduced in the Lakota version of their birth as a people in the Black Hills. Thus, in the case discussed here, Lakota and White historians have come into conflict precisely because they ask the same questions and accept the same methods for answering them.

The opposing views on Lakota history presented above thus represent but two variations of one and the same theme – a discourse on ‘truth’ in this specific sense. The narratives find their legitimacy and justification with reference to objective history. Version 1 is based on written documents and archeological evidence, version 2 on oral tradition and contesting interpretations of archeological evidence and written documents. That version 2 is partly based on oral tradition does not mean that it is itself part of that tradition. As I will argue below, what constitutes the important difference between modern historiography and oral tradition is not their specific substance, but how that substance is interpreted and deemed relevant. The stories recounted above are structured around specific dates, and individual life histories, and specific events are subsumed within one and the same temporal and spatial framework. Only in a superficial sense are the stories different and contradictory. Their contents differ although their very form and logic testify to their mutual commitment to objectified ‘truth’. It is precisely because of this acceptance of truth in this particular sense, as legitimization, that the two versions compete.

In sharp contrast to this ‘discourse on truth’ stands Lakota oral tradition. In my discussions with some of my Lakota friends and consultants, I have been struck by their lack of interest in ‘truth’ in the objectified sense. Stories of the past and of the spirit world are worth telling and listening to because they are relevant, that is, *morally* true.

Simon Ortiz, Acoma Indian and college instructor, writes that Indian oral history ‘is a recognition of what has a moral value’ (1977: 14). He continues:

Indian oral history has not been acceptable to American society not because it has been unwritten but because the Indian system of moral value has not been accepted. A value system which is based upon relationships with all things is not efficient within the workings of the American social system. A value system which is all inclusive – in the ultimate sense, speaking of a responsibility for all the universe – is unwieldy according to the precepts of the American system which is conveniently exclusive and finds useful only those parts which gain precedence and dominance over others. The Indian value system which takes into account even the most insignificant items of life, based on a shared and systematic responsibility, therefore has not been acceptable. (S. Ortiz, 1977: 14)

With specific reference to the Lakota, Severt Young Bear tells us that:

Our stories and songs, we should remember, also teach us lessons. Sure, dates and facts are often missing, sometimes they’re not accurate in the way historians and anthropologists like it, but our oral tradition tells the truth and the heart of the meaning stays alive from mouth to ear. (Theisz and Young Bear, 1994: 16)

Indian oral tradition does not find its legitimization in ‘truth’ in the narrow scientific sense. According to Alfonso Ortiz, Tewa Indian and anthropologist:

My world is the Tewa world. It is different from your world [. . .] Consider the question of the origin of the Native America peoples. Archeologists will tell you that we came at least 12,000 years ago from Asia, crossing the Bering land bridge, then spreading over the two American continents. These archeologists have dug countless holes in the earth looking for spearpoints, bones, traces of fires; they have subjected these objects to sophisticated dating analysis – seeking to prove or disprove a hypothesis or date [. . .] But a Tewa is not so interested in the work of the archeologists. A Tewa is interested in our own story of our origin, for it holds all that we need to know about our people, and how one should live as a human. The story defines our society. It tells me who I am, where I came from, the boundaries of my world, what kind of order exists within it; how suffering, evil, and death came into this world; and what is likely to happen to me when I die. (Ortiz, 1991: 7)

In Lakota oral tradition ‘[h]istorical fact was valued not according to its chronological accuracy but according to its relevance for the people’ (DeMallie in Walker, 1982: 113). The Lakotas also kept winter counts (*wanietu iyawapi*, lit. ‘winter they count’) – pictographic records on hide or paper, with one pictograph representing each winter (i.e. year). These counts, which were kept by a tribal historian, served both as mnemonic devices to recall events of the past as well as to teach and instruct. Each pictograph was a simple drawing, the interpretation of which demanded a thorough knowledge in tribal history. The keepers of the counts, writes DeMallie, ‘integrated stories of all kinds into their oral repertoires [. . .] There is no doubt that the contents of such stories changed over time as the counts passed from one keeper to the next [. . .] In this way history was kept current and relevant’ (Walker, 1982: 112–13).

Just as is the case with Lakota words, stories and songs, the pictographs do not contain or ‘fix’ meanings. Rather, meaning and significance are brought forth in an interpretative process involving speakers and listeners, senders and receivers. The stories and songs are like seeds fertilizing the minds of the people, making them activate their cosmological points of reference in the creation and re-creation of a world of meaning and truth that is distinctly Lakota. From this perspective, symbols are not containers of meaning, but catalysts for a process of meaning *making*.

This logic of history does not challenge, nor is it in a true sense challenged by, modern historiography. It cannot do so because, as I have argued above, they are of a different order. We might even say with Tambiah that ‘no meaningful comparison is feasible [. . .] because the two phenomena in question have such narrow bases of agreement or shared space that they are better treated as distinctive configurations’ (1990: 131). If this is so, we may argue that Lakota oral tradition remains exterior to power simply by not challenging it.

Paradoxically, it thus seems as if the emerging Indian historiography that explicitly sets out to challenge Western hegemony cannot but

reproduce it. 'Indigenous ideology' (see Dirlik, 1996) involves a redefinition of identity for the purpose of resistance which, by resorting to a modernist discourse, paradoxically denies the very distinctiveness it purports to define. In the words of Gareth Griffiths:

[E]ven when the subaltern appears to 'speak' there is a real concern as to whether what we are listening to is really a subaltern voice, or whether the subaltern is being spoken by the subject position they occupy within the larger discursive economy. (quoted in Dirlik, 1996: 7)

The assumption is thus that in order for the voice of the 'subaltern' to be genuinely his, it must emerge from outside 'the larger discursive economy'. If it does not, it is the structure itself that speaks, and the subaltern merely lends his voice to it.

I see three main problems with this position: first, it provides the subaltern with but one position from which to speak: if his discourse is modernist it is not his own; he is merely 'being spoken'. Not only can this argument be attacked on moral and political grounds as being imperialist, it can also be challenged for its implicit assumption that the larger discursive economy determines what can be said. Although the dominant discourse certainly dictates the frames and the logic for the subaltern, they do not merely copy it, but reproduce it in a specific form. Dominant discourse, then, determines the structure but not the contents of indigenist discourse.

Second, we have the problem of self-reference. If speaking within 'the larger discursive economy' implies but 'being spoken', then the argument against the authenticity of the subaltern's voice applies equally to Griffiths' own. The problem becomes obvious when we paraphrase his own quotation:

[E]ven when Griffiths appears to 'speak' there is a real concern as to whether what we are listening to is really his voice, or whether he is being spoken by the subject position he occupies within the larger discursive economy.

The third, and I believe the most important, objection is that the voice of the subaltern is regarded as synonymous with indigenism. As I have argued in this article, the overt challenge to Western historiography is generated mainly by an intellectual elite among the Lakotas. Although I do not hesitate to label this production of a counter-image to Western historiography as resistance, I have suggested that there is another, and deeper, form of resistance that is pervasive yet less visible.

Concluding remarks

As we have seen, there is among some Lakotas a tendency to supplement or even replace the logic of oral history with a 'scientific' logic. Lakota narratives of history thus become subsumed within this specific discursive

framework. Why this particular discourse of the past has emerged is quite obvious. In order to publicly challenge the White historians' version of Lakota history, indigenous historians have to enter the same arena as their opponents. They have to battle on the same field and with the same weapons and concepts. Thus the dominant discourse – a specific discourse on truth – has reproduced itself among the Lakotas.

The need for challenging the White version of history is partly and most significantly based on the land claims, and the Black Hills Claim in particular. If the Lakotas can prove that they were born in the Black Hills and never conquered it, so the argument goes, their case is so much the stronger. Another reason for challenging not only White historians, but also anthropologists, writers, journalists and film-makers, is more fundamental and less specific. It stems from a feeling of uneasiness in having one's history, identity, spirituality and problems continuously defined by outsiders. Contesting these outside definitions is, to some, an end in itself. It is a resistance to becoming encompassed in the life world of another; of being made into an object to be understood, studied and categorized.

A dominant discourse will reproduce itself time and time again. Since Lakota oral tradition in many important respects does not deal with the same issues as academic history does, it cannot challenge the latter. A new discourse, based on very different premises, is continuously created. It is a modernist discourse because Western historiography is. What we have here is a 'contamination', where one politically dominant discourse invades and transforms a politically subordinate one. Tambiah writes, with reference to the monopolization of 'truth' by the natural ('objectivist') sciences:

On the one hand the process of diffusion of spill-over effects from the hard core of science to the several surrounding domains of life, which are now invested with distinct logics, results in their having the monopoly effect of filling all the moral and social space in which we live. This process of alleged scientific reasoning [...] is reluctant, even opposed, to admitting other modes of consciousness or other world orientations into any space it already occupies, for it imperialistically expands to fill all the space available. (Tambiah, 1990: 151)

Scientific discourse on history has thus come to reproduce itself in Lakota life, not because of its superior explanatory power but because of its political dominance. The 'discourse on truth' did not emerge among the Lakotas until quite recently, and when it did, it was to challenge the interpretative privilege of Lakota reality seized by others.

Many Lakota people still interpret the world in terms of relationships and mutual dependencies that transcend the human world. To them, the reaffirmation of these relationships is a sacred duty. Every ritual and prayer is concluded with the words *mitakuye oyas'in* ('all my relatives'), which

re-establishes the relationships within which Lakota life makes sense and has a purpose. A statement or a story is in this context relevant, true and important, to the extent that it explores and confirms relatedness. Legitimacy is anchored in social life and a sacred world order. These representations of human life are not interested in 'truth' as an object and are therefore neither encompassed nor subjugated.

Notes

I would like to thank the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation for supporting the project 'Native American Ecocosmologies and Environmental Ethics: Animism, Modernity, and the Cultural Phenomenology of Human–Environmental Relations', conducted in collaboration with Professor Alf Hornborg at the Human Ecology Division, Lund University.

- 1 This rendering of power as something both enabling and repressive might run the risk of being accused of essentialism. 'Power' here refers to a historically situated opportunity structure that provides different groups and individuals with unequal access to such means by which they can realize their goals.
- 2 'The Black Hills Claim' is the largest in the history of the United States. In 1980 the Supreme Court affirmed a Court of Claims ruling in the Black Hills Claim and awarded the Lakota \$106 million, money which to this day has not been accepted by the Lakota. The vast majority of Lakota today are not ready to accept monetary compensation, but want the land back (for a detailed account of the Black Hills Claim see Lazarus, 1991).
- 3 Apparently a version based on Walker's collection (1980). James Walker was a physician on the Pine Ridge Reservation 1896–1914 and organized fragments of stories from elderly men chronologically so as to construct a coherent creation story. According to Jahner, Walker 'prepared a dramatization of all he had learned while at Pine Ridge. In effect, he transformed Oglala lore into literary epic' (in Walker, 1983: vii).
- 4 Giago refers to a book by archeologist Jeffery Goodman titled *Indians, the First People on Earth* but gives no bibliographic information.

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