

# APA Newsletters

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## NEWSLETTER ON AMERICAN INDIANS IN PHILOSOPHY

FROM THE EDITORS, KATY GRAY BROWN & LORRAINE MAYER

MY SYMPOSIUM, LORRAINE MAYER

### ARTICLES

GLADYS LINKLATER

“A Discussion on Traditional Tribal Religious Philosophical Beliefs  
and Western Christian Philosophical Attitudes”

VANDA FLEURY

“Cultural Delineations of the Interpretation of Myth”

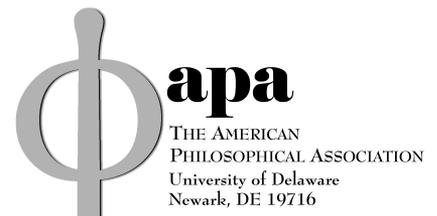
### BOOK REVIEWS

Dale Turner: *This Is Not a Peace Pipe:  
Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*

REVIEWED BY RYAN BRUYERE

Dale Turner: *This Is Not a Peace Pipe:  
Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*

REVIEWED BY JAMIE PARIS





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## FROM THE EDITORS

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For those of us working in the area of Native philosophy broadening our discussions by engaging in a cross-border dialogue with Canadian scholars/students was an exciting prospect to consider. A cross-border dialogue not only has the potential to increase our knowledge of Native philosophy but provides an arena for ongoing mentorship with Canadian Aboriginal students whose experience with Native philosophers is extremely limited. While the study of philosophy is an ancient discipline for Aboriginal students in Canada, it is a fairly new arena to negotiate. Most Aboriginal students balk at the idea of engaging in philosophical discussion, especially if they are deeply committed to their own worldviews; however, that is slowly changing, not the commitment to their own worldviews but previous rejection of Western philosophy. In order to encourage their continuation and promote cross-border dialogue the editors have decided to dedicate this issue to these up and coming northern voices. For the first time in Canadian history, Aboriginal graduate and undergraduate First Nations, Métis, and non-status students give voice to their philosophical concerns from within the Western framework.

The first two student papers were written by Aboriginal women concerned with the area of Religion/Spirituality. Gladys Linklater (Ithineew), from Nisichawayasihk commonly known as Nelson House, Manitoba, pursues issues of religion from within her Cree understanding in a paper entitled "A Discussion on Traditional Tribal Religious Philosophical Beliefs and Western Christian Philosophical Attitudes." The second paper, by Vanda Fleury (Métis student) from Beulah (whose family originates from St. Lazare, Manitoba), engages in an analysis of comparative philosophy in the paper "Cultural Delineations of the Interpretation of Myth."

The next two articles are book reviews written by male students interested in social political thought. While Miss Fleury and Miss Linklater critique Western Religious ideology, and Ryan Bruyere (Anishinabe) from Sagkeeng First Nation and Jamie Paris (mixed-blood Aboriginal) from Winnipeg, Manitoba, take on the daunting task of critiquing the recent publication *This Is Not a Peace Pipe* by Dale Turner (Anishinabe).

It is the editors' hope that this *Newsletter* will provide a space to renew the relationship between Native peoples that was enjoyed before official Borders and colonial attitudes altered the landscape of North America.

Lorraine Mayer

### Call for submissions:

The *APA Newsletter on American Indians in Philosophy* seeks articles, syllabi, and book reviews. We welcome readers to volunteer to review books and materials.

Deadline for submissions for the Fall edition is June 1st, 2007. Please send submissions to both editors:

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Submission guidelines can be found at: <http://www.apaonline.org/publications/newsletters/guidelines.asp>

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### *My Symposium*

#### Lorraine Mayer

I fell onto the couch  
that graced the symposium  
and lost myself to dreams.  
I walked a beaten path  
to feel the Parthenon  
I heard the voice of  
ancient philosophers  
and felt the mystery.  
Oh Socrates, oh Plato  
Your words remain  
Embedded in the minds of  
Women folk left behind.  
Left trying to make sense  
To re-create a world created  
through simplicity in words  
by philosophers confused.  
Why Socrates, why Plato  
you saw your strength  
in understanding...all.  
You saw naught the beauty  
that unfolds the starlit night  
breathing serenity  
upon the land.  
You saw quadrangles with  
mathematical certainty  
and forced the absolute out of  
fluidity denying the source  
of life pulsating change  
then asked what's really real.  
You saw naught the life  
in women's hands but  
only warrior's skills  
holding aloft a deadly sword  
and hailed the mighty man

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But you missed the mother's  
strength that brought him out  
of the womb to manly time  
Oh Socrates, oh Plato  
You saw the politics  
the fair republic held aloft  
You heard naught the voice  
that soothed the turbulent  
trials of hunger, chaos, fear  
that winds its way through  
families long before the man  
has learned to crawl out of  
reality into metaphysical  
confusion...placing man above  
it all.  
At my symposium  
I saw the candles burning  
I smelled the sweetgrass  
I saw my grandmother  
walking

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## ARTICLES

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### ***A Discussion on Traditional Tribal Religious Philosophical Beliefs and Western Christian Philosophical Attitudes***

**Gladys Linklater**  
*Brandon University*

This paper compares the philosophic ground of traditional tribal Indian religion and Western Christianity. It discusses the contrasting worldviews of both religions. It also examines the federal policies and practices concerning Indian religions, as well as the legal issues surrounding Indian religious beliefs and practices. Various traditional tribal ceremonies and celebrations will be discussed and the different ways traditional tribal peoples tried to cope with Western Christianity. Some advocated Christianity, others spoke against it, and there were those who tried to compromise by incorporating Christianity with tribal religious beliefs.

Traditionally, Aboriginal people had a rich and vibrant culture, which thrived on ceremony, a deep respect for the land, and a kinship with the animal kingdom. Ceremony was an integral part of Aboriginal life; it was alive with prayer, worship, drum, songs, and dance. Historically, the arrival of Europeans changed the traditional ceremonial way of life. For many decades the missionaries and the federal government tried to eradicate Tribal Indian Religion and tried to replace it with Western Christianity.

In the early 1960s during the civil rights movement when America was in upheaval and chaos with political protests and demands for equal rights and treatment,<sup>1</sup> the Indians were just beginning to discover their own culture and were beginning to figure out the reality of their own religious experience. During this time many tribes came out into the open with their religious ceremonies and practices after many decades of suppression.<sup>2</sup> It was in the same era that non-Native Americans were soul

searching and seeking an alternate religious understanding of the world. They looked to the Indians for answers and select traditional Indian ceremonies were adopted. Many Aboriginal people are highly critical of this practice.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, the difference in religious beliefs and attitudes has caused misunderstandings and hostility between the North American Indian people and Westerners. North American Indians have a set of philosophical beliefs about existence that is interconnected and relational, while Western Christianity has a philosophical attitude toward existence that leads to a separate and distinct understanding of the world. The European world was seen as an evolutionary process in which mankind evolved towards a monotheistic conception of divinity.<sup>4</sup> Indian tribal religion considers creation as an ecosystem present in a definable place. Creation is a cycle and everything is related.<sup>5</sup>

In Western European ideology man is on top of the evolutionary scale; therefore, he has the right to use and dominate the earth. But in the American Indian belief system their lands and places have the highest possible meaning.<sup>6</sup> Indian tribal religions affirm the existence of a particular place, which is considered to be holy. Different tribal religions relate to the land on which they live and not to their supposed position along an evolutionary scale or that they were made in the image of God.<sup>7</sup> Christianity emphasizes creation as a specific and sequential event, which has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. God created the world in seven days, then he created man and woman, and out of these two people humankind evolved.<sup>8</sup>

While many tribes use the term "Grandfather" when praying to "God," there is no demand to have a personal relationship with the "Great Spirit," whereas a personal relationship with God is emphasized in Christianity. God is also jealous and vengeful and will punish you if you displease him. In Indian tribal religion punishment does not come from God but, rather, from inappropriate relations, which leads to the difference in the concept of relationship between human beings and nature.<sup>9</sup>

For many tribal religions the whole of creation is good; the meaning of creation is that all parts of it function together to sustain it. Man and the rest of creation cooperate and are respectful of the task set for them by the creator.<sup>10</sup> In the Indian tribal religion all of creation has a role to fill, and the task is to maintain a proper relationship with other living things. Man is dependent on everything in creation for his existence, and each life form has its own purpose. Therefore, man must be respectful to all creation at all times in order to live and prosper.<sup>11</sup> The Western world, on the other hand, appears to follow the Lockean notion that God gave the world to man to use as he deems necessary.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of history is another aspect of both religions that is of major difference. Christianity emphasized the importance of recording history. Mankind was recorded in a linear fashion in which the whole purpose of the creation event was made clear. It revealed the history of man, the end of the world, and the existence of a further world where only the faithful are welcome. Time is also important to Christians but is insignificant to tribal people. In Christianity time is running out and the world is coming to an end.<sup>13</sup> Among the Indian tribes knowledge and beliefs are passed down through oral tradition and everything is done in a circular fashion. This is called the sacred circle of life.<sup>14</sup>

Indian tribes did not record past events. In the accounts of past tribal experiences, the story itself is of importance, not the occurrence of the event. For instance, the Sioux story of White Buffalo Calf woman who brought the sacred pipe is an occurrence of an event. The sacred pipe is important as a personal object of salvation, not the woman herself, and while

this is an important aspect of Sioux culture, it is not the whole basis for Sioux beliefs.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, in the Christian religion the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus is a past event, but it is the whole basis of Christianity. It is believed to be the culmination of events going back to the creation of the Universe. It is also believed that Jesus will be back to judge when the world ends.<sup>16</sup>

Creation and destructive events such as the great flood are said to be memories of the survivors. All traditional tribes have a flood story, which are along the same lines but with different characters. The Christian flood story bears close resemblance to traditional tribal flood stories. In the Christian version Noah saves the animals, but in the tribal version it is usually an animal that saves the world and the people in it.<sup>17</sup>

American tribal religion also differs with Western Christian religion on the notion of life after death. Christians fear death but look forward to it as a final passage to a better world. In the Christian concept of death there will be a judgment based on good and evil deeds and whether or not you are baptized or turned your life to Jesus. If man is evil and not baptized he will go straight to hell. In tribal religions there is an absence of the fear of death and the concept of hell. Tribal peoples accept death as part of life and are not worried about judgment.<sup>18</sup>

Burial mounds are an indication that life after death was a continuation of the life already experienced. Indian graveyards had markers of wood because it was felt that the body and the wood would both return to the earth. The dead were also buried with their bundles because it was believed that they were going on a journey to the next world. Another world, not necessarily a better world.<sup>19</sup> In Christian cemeteries stone grave markers are used and the caskets are designed to preserve the body, which indicates a separation of body from soil and indicates the determination not to allow the body to become part of the soil.<sup>20</sup>

Western religion distinguishes between God and the world. In the modern world God is removed from the world; that is, we are here in the present but God is out there in a transcendental realm, though he can be reached through a personal relationship (or at least Jesus can).<sup>21</sup> For Native American religion God is not remote or separate from this world; this world overflows with religious significance. God is everywhere, God is in creation, and God is in people. God is not somewhere up in the sky waiting and watching for someone to make a mistake so he can punish him or her.<sup>22</sup>

In the Western worldview there are three domains: Heaven, Earth, and Hell. There is a gap between “nature” and “human.” Nature is viewed as a three-fold entity; there are inanimate forces, such as wind, rock, earth; and organic life, such as grass, trees, and plants; animals are beings with anima and no soul and are also positioned below humans. However, humans are animate and are endowed with reason, self-consciousness, and genuine decision-making power. Therefore, nature exists for humans and nature is to be used. Everything is a separate unit and nothing is related. Organic life does not feel and animals do not think. Nature is unimportant and insignificant.<sup>23</sup>

North American Indians and Westerners also differ significantly in their philosophic placement of gender. The first difference for Westerners is that ultimate reality is viewed in male terms. He is the creator, the judge, and the guide. Moreover, the structure of the world is hierarchically ordered, economically, socially, and politically. Furthermore, the historicity of the created world is with a beginning and an ending. In addition, there is a dichotomous reality of positive and negative, human and divine, human verses nature, salvation and damnation. This worldview is negative when compared with the worldview of the North American Indian.<sup>24</sup>

In comparison, for the numerous tribes of the Northern Western Hemisphere, at the center of the universe there lay a mystery named differently by different tribal peoples, Manitou, Wakan Tanka, etc. This mystery represented interdependent formations of the sacred forces with immense power (as opposed to male power) that were in constant and complex interaction. These sacred forces were the sun, storms, and rain; others were delicate, such as the butterfly and the ants, or humble, as the moles underground. These forces were deeply respected and held in high esteem. Gender was not a prerequisite nor was bifurcation significant. Ceremonies were performed to show appreciation and gratitude to the great mystery and the powers of the universe.<sup>25</sup> Ceremonies were also directed to female entities such as Corn mother and Grandmother spider.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, these formations of sacred forces were perceived as people. They were referred to as the four-legged, the two-legged, the crawling, the swimming, or winged people; trees were called the standing people, and if their bark or sap was collected for human use they were approached with a ritual sense of gratitude. From the perception of tribal peoples there was no such entity as “nature.” All forms of beings were on a similar plane and were not hierarchically ordered.<sup>27</sup> Many traditional people still believe in the sacredness of the animals and plants and practice these beliefs today.

Several features of the tribal worldview are: first, sacredness meant the kinship and interdependence among beings, large and small, visible and invisible; all interacted on a spectral scale of mutuality rather than in dualistic opposition. Moreover, the numerous names for the “great mystery,” such as the “thunder beings,” the “grandfathers,” or the “corn mother,” all pointed to the great primal force that forms, permeates, and is the universe. Secondly, there was a perception that all beings were interconnected; therefore, there was no dualism of good and evil.<sup>28</sup> Third, the history of the world was neither linear nor moving toward a divinely set end; instead, the world was understood as a circular flow in a rhythmic continuum. The coordinates of above and below and the four directions define it. Last, the worldview was tied to the proper use of sacred items and the proper performance of sacred rites. People lived according to this philosophical worldview.<sup>29</sup>

American tribal people have various religious beliefs and practices, which have been scorned, ridiculed, romanticized, repressed, misunderstood, and formally prohibited. But in spite of everything Native religious traditions have survived and have recently showed signs of resurgence. In tribal beliefs all aspects of life take on religious (spiritual) significance that makes religion and culture intimately connected. This is what made Native religion different from Western Christianity; this distinctiveness of Native American religions gave rise to misunderstanding and hostility among non-Indians.<sup>30</sup> The missionaries called Native religion pagan and superstitious and made it their job to Christianize the Indians.

In the early 1800s Native religious ceremonies were banned and criminalized. The Potlatch, the Sundance, the giveaway ceremonies, the sweat lodge, and the peyote religion were all considered pagan, superstitious, and evil. The Potlatch law was passed in 1884 and effective January 1, 1885, the law made a person who engaged in a potlatch guilty of misdemeanor and liable to imprisonment for a term of two to six months.<sup>31</sup> The ban was removed in 1934. Many respected medicine men and holy men spent time in prison for persisting with their ceremonial religious life.

The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 was a significant departure from the negative position toward Native American religion, which had dominated Federal Policy

and Practice. Until 1934 agents and agencies of the federal government had repeatedly attempted to wipe out Native American religion. However, tensions between governmental and traditional practices were not entirely eliminated. Federal agencies ignored the act and continued to treat tribal beliefs and practices with ignorance and disrespect.<sup>32</sup> The treatment of the dead and Indian burial sites illustrates this problem.

In 1965, a university student was charged for the removal of a skull of a Seminole Indian who had died two years earlier. The court dismissed the charge because “Seminole do not bury their dead in any particular area and...survivors never return to visit the gravesites.” In 1966 a Supreme Judicial court permitted a utilities company to excavate an “Indian burial site on the ground that Indian burial was random in Nature and that no tract of land was involved that had been specifically set aside for burial purposes.”<sup>33</sup> The struggle for Religious Freedom continued even with the Indian Civil Rights Act (ICRA) of 1968 that provided the free exercise of religion by individual tribal members.<sup>34</sup>

Into the 1970s American Indians were still struggling to exercise their traditional religious practices. In 1972 three Pawnee children were suspended from public school for violating the dress code. They wore long braids, which was an “expression of tradition and heritage and was a symbol of religious identity.” They claimed the dress code violated their religious freedom.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in 1973, Jerry Teterud, a Cree prisoner, brought a class action complaint against the prison authorities for their regulations concerning hair length. He maintained that wearing long hair was part of his religion and was entitled to the first amendment protection. The court recognized and acknowledged that Native American beliefs may be religious and that long hair may be an expression of religion.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to these two violations of religious freedom, in 1975, Carlos Frank, an Athabaskan, was arrested and convicted for illegally transporting a moose. Frank justified his actions on free exercise grounds. He argued that the wild meat was for a traditional funeral potlatch, which was in accordance with his religious practice. The Supreme Court accepted the evidence as “inescapable that the utilization of moose meat at a funeral potlatch is a practice deeply rooted in the Athabaskan religion.”<sup>37</sup> Several other positive federal policies were enacted regarding the religious freedoms of American Indian peoples.

The Native American Historical cultural and Sacred Sites Act of 1976 was designed to assist Native Americans in gaining and maintaining access to traditional sacred sites on both private and public lands.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 was designed to protect the Freedom of Religion of Native Americans. The Act protects and preserves the inherent right of Native people to believe, express, and exercise their traditional religions, including the access to sites, the use and possession of sacred objects, and freedom to worship through ceremonial and traditional rights.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 was passed but was limited to “any material remains...of human life or activities” that are at least 100 years of age and that are found in areas over which the federal government exercises some control.<sup>40</sup> Federal officials and agencies honored few of these acts.

Consequently, renewed legislations were enacted, such as the Native American Graves Protections and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA). This implementation did not include art auction houses, dealers, private collectors, corporations, and other non-federally funded institutions. They are not required to notify Native Nations of potentially repatriable materials in their collections, although they undoubtedly possess numerous

ceremonial objects, which they classify as nothing more than art with no sacred significance attached to them.<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, the American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation (1991) assists in the repatriation of ceremonial material to Native nations, clans, or families who are the rightful owners.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the American Religions Freedoms Act Amendments of 1994 legislation guarantees American Indians the right to use the sacrament of peyote in traditional religious ceremonies throughout the United States. The peyote religious ceremony is said to be one of the oldest forms of worship among the American Indians.<sup>43</sup> Today there are members of the Native North American Church all across Canada and the United States.

The Native American tribes appreciate how their sacred space and their religious orientations are inseparably related to the land of their people. They do not perceive the spiritual as distinct from their land. Their land and religion are one.<sup>44</sup> The land is their mother, their origin, nature, and destiny. Therefore, Native American tribal religions encompass everything in their ceremonies.<sup>45</sup>

The Bean Ceremony (Iroquois) is one such ceremony in which prayers are directed to the beans. They were considered to be one of the three sacred foods, along with corn and squash and other plant spirits. The ceremony was performed in order to thank the plant spirits for past bounties and to ask them to continue bearing fruit.<sup>46</sup> Another plant ceremony was the Berry Festival (Cree) in which there was singing of sacred songs and prayers that sought the help of spirits. This festival was conducted in late summer and fall when berries were available.<sup>47</sup> There was also the Green Corn Ceremony (Muskogee), which brought in the Creek New Year. It has been referred to as one of the New World’s “Oldest unbroken ceremonial traditions.”<sup>48</sup> In addition to plant ceremonies there were various types of dances, which were held for different purposes.

The Bear dance (California) was held in the fall or winter. These dances were short and intense. They were held to bring the beneficent aspects of bear power into a community. There was also the begging dance (Lakota, Blackfoot, Ojibway-others), which was an appeal to the creator to have the people who prospered give to the needy. The begging dance emphasized that the creator would kindly treat those who shared.<sup>49</sup> The Harvest dance (Pueblo) was an agricultural dance, performed by men and women in August or September to offer thanks for the summer bounty.<sup>50</sup> The Bush dance was a ceremony whose primary purpose was to recognize the spirits connected with bushes and trees and thank them for their growth.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, there were ceremonies to secure game animals asking them to give up their hide and meat.

Traditional religious ceremonies were held for several other purposes. In addition, there was a ceremonial runner (Mesquakie) who ran hundreds of miles to communicate information among his own people as well as to distant groups. This was a highly respected position rooted in religious belief and practice, and only people who were spiritually blessed and instructed could hold it.<sup>52</sup> The Initiation Ceremony (Cocopa) was held for boys and girls who were nearing marriage age. During the four-day ceremony the boy’s nasal septum was pierced and the girl’s chin was tattooed.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, a Hair Cutting Ceremony (Western Apache) was conducted following the putting on moccasins ceremony. A shaman applied cattail pollen ritually to the child’s cheek and head four times and then closely cropped the hair while praying for the child’s long life.<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, ceremonies were held for the holy people (Dineh) among the deities referred to, as the holy people were the sun, earth, moon, sky, the thunder, and winds. It was believed the holy people had the power to aid or harm people

on earth.<sup>55</sup> There was also a separate ceremony for the holy wind (Navajo), a spiritual being that gave life, thought, speech, movement, and behavior to all living things and served as a means of communication between all elements of the living world.<sup>56</sup>

Ceremonies and feasts were also held for the dead. There was a dance for the spirits (Blackfeet), which was believed to have ancient origins. The ritual elements included inviting the spirits of the dead to the ceremony, the singing of specific sacred songs, and the symbolic painting of the dancers, the smoking of the pipe, and four periods of dancing.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, there were chanters for the dead (Iroquois). Chanters were a society dominated by women who held closed meetings and who owned certain songs.<sup>58</sup> The Death Feast (Shawnee) was held annually to honor the spirits of the deceased and was held in the home.<sup>59</sup>

Even though the government and the missionaries forbade most of the dances and ceremonies, traditional tribal peoples continued to practice their beliefs by combining them with Christianity. One of these people was Abishabis (small eyes), a Cree prophet of a religious movement in 1842-1843. The movement had fragments of Christianity but was rooted in Cree culture. It was said that Abishabis was influenced by words in hymns written in Cree syllabics. He had a companion named Wasitek (light). Abishabis and Wasitek warned against the white ways while pointing out the promise of game and other heavenly rewards for those who followed their teachings. The message of the prophets also placed an emphasis upon returning to the native ways.<sup>60</sup> Still, there were others who promoted Christianity and the adoption of Euro-American ways. Aupaumut Hendrick (1830-1857) was one such person. He was influenced by Christianity and Euro-American culture from birth; he promoted adoptions of the new ways as the best means to survive.<sup>61</sup>

Further, there was the blending of Indian religious beliefs and Christianity. One of these was the prayer dance (Ojibway) that combined traditional and Christian elements. Introduced by Joseph Abita in 1882, the dance included the use of a drum blessed by a member of the Benedictine order. This dance helped to gain Catholic converts.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the Indian Shaker religion was founded by John Slocum in 1881. It was a blending of Native and Christian beliefs in which the Indian Shakers used crucifixes, candles, bells, and pictures in their churches. The Indian Shaker religion continues to have Indian adherents.<sup>63</sup>

In the mid 1900s medicine men and traditional religious leaders began reintroducing traditional tribal religious ceremonies. Big Day William was a Shoshone religious leader who reintroduced the Sundance to the Crow people in 1941. He was baptized as a Catholic but was later excommunicated from the church for participating in peyote meetings. Another medicine man reintroduced the spirit lodge dance among the Arapaho in 1955.<sup>64</sup>

Today, traditional tribal religious ceremonies and beliefs are no longer prohibited and are openly practiced. After over a century of suppression North American Indians regained their right to practice their religious ceremonies. Many of the ceremonial rituals and practices survived despite persecution and suppression. In the contemporary modern world Native American religious ceremonies and practices are now being expropriated and commercialized by non-Native Americans who call themselves “New Agers.” Non-Native Americans found an alternate religious understanding of the world in “Native American spirituality” and, as a result, traditional tribal religious beliefs and practices are now being violated and exploited by the “New Agers.”<sup>65</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Vine Deloria, Jr. *God is Red*. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap Publishers, 1973), 60.
2. *Ibid.*, 62.
3. See Ward Churchill, “A Little Matter of Genocide: Native American Spirituality and New Age Hucksterism,” *The Bloomsbury Review* (September/October 1988). (Reprinted in Churchill 1992). See also Lisa Aldred, *Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality* (The University of Nebraska, 2001).
4. Deloria, 76.
5. *Ibid.*, 91.
6. *Ibid.*, 75.
7. *Ibid.*, 81-82.
8. *Ibid.*, 91.
9. *Ibid.*, 92-93.
10. *Ibid.*, 96.
11. *Ibid.*, 102.
12. Thomas I. Cooke, ed. *Two Treaties of Government* (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1947), 136-37.
13. Deloria, 111.
14. See Sioui E. Georges, *For an Amerindian Autohistory* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992).
15. Deloria, 113-14.
16. *Ibid.*, 117-19.
17. *Ibid.*, 156.
18. *Ibid.*, 171.
19. *Ibid.*, 174.
20. *Ibid.*, 184.
21. Terry P. Wilson and Robert A. Black. *The American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. VI. no. 3 (California: University of California, 1983), 111.
22. Wilson and Black, 112.
23. Duane Champagne. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (Regent of the University of California, 1989), 62.
24. *Ibid.*, 63.
25. *Ibid.*, 67.
26. See Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* (Beacon Press, 1986).
27. Champagne, 67.
28. *Ibid.*, 68.
29. *Ibid.*, 69.
30. Wilson and Black, 112.
31. Arlene Herschfelder and Paulette Molin. *Encyclopedia of Native American Religions* (Checkermark Books, 2001), 40.
32. Wilson and Black, 115.
33. *Ibid.*, 118-19.
34. *Ibid.*, 114.
35. *Ibid.*, 128.
36. *Ibid.*, 129-30.
37. *Ibid.*, 119.
38. *Ibid.*, 116.
39. Herschfelder and Molin, 5.
40. Wilson and Black, 119.
41. Herschfelder and Molin, 6.
42. *Ibid.*, 5.
43. *Ibid.*, 4.
44. Champagne, 1-2.
45. *Ibid.*, 4-5.
46. Herschfelder and Molin, 14.
47. *Ibid.*, 17.
48. *Ibid.*, 34.
49. *Ibid.*, 15-16.

50. *Ibid.*, 17.
51. *Ibid.*, 34.
52. *Ibid.*, 44.
53. *Ibid.*, 129.
54. *Ibid.*, 112.
55. *Ibid.*, 122.
56. *Ibid.*, 123.
57. *Ibid.*, 5.
58. *Ibid.*, 45.
59. *Ibid.*, 66.
60. *Ibid.*, 1.
61. *Ibid.*, 10.
62. *Ibid.*, 229.
63. *Ibid.*, 129.
64. *Ibid.*, 130.
65. See Aldred 2001; Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Cornell University Press, 2001); Churchill 1988; Monroe, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of the American Indians* (Common Courage Press, 1992) and *Indians Are Us? Culture and Genocide in Native North America* (Common Courage Press, 1992); James A. Clifton, *The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990).

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## **Cultural Delineations of the Interpretation of Myth**

**Vanda Fleury**  
*Brandon University*

This paper will demonstrate the importance of not only comparing but also contrasting different cultural interpretations of myths and legends. The implications of this will be discussed in a manner that reflects the philosophical problems between Aboriginals and non-aboriginals in contemporary society.

One well-known example is the flood story in the Old Testament, which involves Noah and his ark. An even older flood story can be found on clay tablet inscriptions, which trace back to the ancient Near East (Sumerian/Babylonian). Another ancient but relatively unknown flood myth is that of the Sandy Lake Cree about “Wee-sa-kay-jac and the Flood.” While certain narratives are undeniably unique to particular groups of people, many correlations can also be drawn that, if done properly, can serve to promote cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. There are many parallels between Wee-sa-kay-jac and the flood, Noah and his ark, and the ancient Near Eastern myth. For example, Utnapishtim is parallel to Noah, as is Wee-se-kay-jac,<sup>1</sup> and vice versa.

In all three narratives, the characters are compelled to build an elaborate vessel that will protect them from the devastation of the flood. In the Old Testament and on the tablet inscriptions from the ancient East, it is an ark, whereas the Cree version describes the vessel as a canoe. Secondly, in all three accounts, rain and strong winds make the journey difficult, although the duration of time spent on the water varies in each legend.<sup>2</sup> All three myths have a lesson that must be learned. The most comparable element noted in the narratives that had the least variation was the role of the dove, the raven, and the wolf. The birds and the wolf are released in an attempt to measure the size of the earth, where each return suggests the inadequacy of the size of earth. Eventually, the raven, the dove, and the wolf do not return, signifying the vastness of the land and the possibility for life to be supported on it.<sup>3</sup> An extension to the

Cree myth can be found in George Nelson’s understanding that beyond the myth is the understanding that every time the wolf howls, it communicates the vastness of the earth.<sup>4</sup> This understanding is a common occurrence in myth, since myths often function to reveal the purpose of certain attributes associated with animals.<sup>5</sup>

Evidently, all three narratives reveal that someone has been angered to the point that destruction ensues. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the story in the Old Testament and the ancient Babylonian version, compared to the Cree legend. In the tale involving Wee-sa-kay-jac, the flood is symbolized as the earth bleeding to death because the Mishipizhiw<sup>6</sup> were digging too far into the core of the earth.<sup>7</sup> This explanation reveals a delicate relationship with the land that is not as prominent in the other narratives. Additionally, while the main characters in the biblical and ancient Near Eastern tales receive special favor from a higher power, ultimately resulting in their survival, the situation of Wee-sa-kay-jac is different. To begin with, Wee-sa-kay-jac is not a human man and, secondly, it chooses to “help” the animals build a vessel, and its actions are not dictated by divine instruction.<sup>8</sup>

While anger may have initiated the flood, it appears that there was no direct attempt to extinguish all living beings in the Cree version. For example, the tablets describe Enlil, a member of the divine assembly, as furious because his plan to “destroy every last mortal with a flood”<sup>9</sup> did not work. In the Old Testament version, God views the earth as corrupt, and “the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, there is no such dialogue in the Cree narrative. While punishment may have been a result of the actions of the Mishipizhiw, the themes of ruthless vengeance and widespread evil are absent, and nowhere does the narrative allude to a planned conspiracy. The collective culpability demonstrated by the animals in the Cree legend in contrast with the theme of individual responsibility in the other two narratives is also a unique element. Furthermore, the most important and striking differences between the Cree version and the other two narratives are that the world was recreated in a way that involved the collective efforts of Wee-sa-kay-jac and the animals. This unique element is nonexistent in the Babylonian and the Old Testament parallels, as it is a God, or gods, who created the world. All of these differences reflect a less hierarchical worldview and more communal method of approaching issues in the Cree flood narrative. Indeed, this example highlights one of the major differences between the way many Aboriginal people view the world compared to members of the dominant society who have largely been influenced by Western ideologies.

It is interesting to note that scholars agree the flood story in the Old Testament is based on the ancient narrative from the Middle East. It is believed that when the Jews were exiled in Babylon, they most likely adopted many of the existing Eastern legends, one of which involved a flood.<sup>11</sup> As this story is part of the Old Testament,<sup>12</sup> it is referred to in all of the Western religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Many of the other stories in the Old Testament may be familiar to the religious adherents of these faiths, but the flood narrative is unique because it is familiar to many people who do not subscribe to the same worldview. While the Cree flood narrative has many distinctions, it is arguable that the essence of this legend is comparable to Christian thought and belief. Author James Stevens admits that “Christian beliefs have been curiously combined with many of the old ways which persist under the veneer of Christianity.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this situation is comparable to the Babylonian account of the flood, as research on ancient

civilizations reveals that this narrative was adopted from an even earlier Sumerian myth, situated in a time frame dating farther back than 1955 B.C.E.<sup>14</sup>

Sumer has cosmological myths and myths of origin, which, like myths everywhere, are in this case both a reflection on the cosmos they are meant to explain, and at the same time a justification of the particular type of society from which they proceed. The myth that tells how cosmic order arose out of the primeval state of things explains this evolution in terms that reflect the natural, material and social conditions particular to Sumer. It must be remembered that this mythology, being of a subjective nature, represents the earliest stage in human thought we know. Here within our grasp are the most ancient origins of myth as well as the very beginnings of human society. The primitive traditional societies of our own time in which myth is still current as a statement of sacred realities merely produce myths that, when all is said and done, are the end product of an evolution of several thousands of years.<sup>15</sup>

This proclamation not only reveals the extent of human existence on the earth but also the potential to develop myths or legends that are not restricted to time and space. Christian principles have often dominated how Western society measures history, which is illustrated in the manipulation of the (Gregorian) calendar to reflect the life of Jesus, often differentiated by B.C., “Before Christ,” and A.D., “Anno Domini, where the literal translation is “in the year of the Lord.”<sup>16</sup> However, the Sumerian/Egyptian flood narratives show that life with religious meaning existed prior to Christianity. In fact, Christian history pales in comparison to that of the ancient era. Overall, this has a humbling effect on Christian claims to ownership of sacred narratives simply because they are in the Bible and mitigates zealous claims that there was no civilized mythological society prior to Jewish religion. While it is beneficial to regard each culture as unique, the fact that many elements have been adopted from other religions and recreated to fit the worldview of another cannot be ignored.

While our vast world history has given us many narratives to compare, it has also revealed a disturbing trend in the ethic and religious thought exhibited by Christian/Europeans when “conquering” foreign lands and people. Many colonizers justified the exploitation of land and people either because they assumed positions of superiority, or because they held the belief that they were saving the savages.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, this was the fate that befell North America’s Indigenous populations. While many people in contemporary society consider this a problem of the past, Christian presumptions of truth and authority persist. The late V. F. Cordova, a Native American philosopher, points out that many Western philosophers assume a superior disposition when considering alien concepts and worldviews. This approach includes:

- (1) the view that all human beings are operating on a common theme; (2) that non-Western peoples are a less complex form of being, less developed than Westerners; and (3) that Indigenous peoples are incapable of engaging in philosophical discussions.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, all of these characteristics can be highlighted in existing ethnocentric publications, many of which are popular today, or have been until quite recently.<sup>19</sup> This self-imposed flattery often begins with the first assumption, which is the belief that all human beings function based on universal standards. This oversight “leads the philosopher astray in picking and choosing bits and pieces from the alien culture to satisfy the

longing for a common theme.”<sup>20</sup> However, as demonstrated in the selected flood narratives, the resemblances are difficult to overlook.

Consequently, many scholars have a tendency to maximize the similarities and dismiss any differences, particularly when elements from a religious worldview are borrowed to promote understanding between groups of people. When comparing worldviews, such a fallacy often results in a superficial belief that all human beings are equal, and that we should all be treated the same. However, this approach ignores an ugly colonial history that has denied equality to many Aboriginal people. Lee Maracle (Stohlo) steadfastly asserts:

We were almost obliterated by your ancestors. I realize you hold no gun to my head...but it was your culture that spawned physical genocide and now you ask me to erase the shadow of my grandmother. Before you ask me to erase her, please reduce yourself to a shadow. Then, we will at least be equal. At base zero, I am willing to negotiate a whole new culture, if you like. Otherwise, keep your offensive words locked in your narrow mind.<sup>21</sup>

To truly be able to see one another as human beings, circumstances from both the past and the present that have shaped our individual and collective identities must be considered. An Aboriginal person whose reality has undeniably been shaped by colonization will have a difficult time writing off past injustices to attain some feigned sense of equality in the dominant society. Ultimately, ignoring, thereby disrespecting, any differences between cultural groups does not create a healthy environment for dialogue. Any attempt to see one another as human beings, with the anticipation of moving ahead in future relations, must begin with an acknowledgement of past injustices and an acceptance of differences. Identity is crucial to all people, and overlooking the many unique aspects that creates diversity is neither desirable nor acceptable. Narrow Western thought has pervaded for too long, and although there is value in recognizing similar characteristics in various religions, this approach does not address problems of the past and will not guarantee a successful existence between Westerners and Aboriginal people in the future.

Viola Cordova argued further that Western supremacy also manifests itself in the belief held by some that non-Western peoples are less complex human beings, and therefore undeveloped when compared to Westerners.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Cordova’s second argument is closely linked to the first, where the emphasis on similarities is used to ignore or minimize Western discomfort with difference. Cordova seems to chastise the reader who is unfamiliar with these observations and also reveals consequential implications of such an approach. She cautions that

we should be aware of why we cling to the notion that there must be a commonality of concepts. We should be open enough to realize that this approach necessarily leads to viewing different cultural perspectives as either “right” or “wrong” based on a standard which is drawn from only one culture.<sup>23</sup>

The formation of biases and presuppositions from each person’s unique background manifest in the interpretation of subject matter, especially in academia. Unfortunately, a substantial amount of Western literature is based on Eurocentric principles that do not easily accommodate variation. All too often Christianity is right and every other religion is wrong.

This phenomenon is observed when one considers the attitudes of missionaries and treatment towards Aboriginal

people during early stages of contact.<sup>24</sup> Admittedly, the Walpole Debate highlights the difference in the principles that governed the two parties' behavior when a discourse on worldviews occurred. The rejection of Christianity, based on complex Native philosophy, confirms that Aboriginal people were just as developed in their thought processes as Europeans.<sup>25</sup> To assume Aboriginal people could not cognitively function at the same level as Europeans would clearly lead to the assumption that all of their practices and beliefs were inferior and immoral, and all Christian beliefs and concepts were pristine theories that needed to be adhered to. However, a careful reading shows that the missionaries were unable to see past their logic of a Christian worldview.

What is most puzzling about this situation is why nobody considered how so many Aboriginal people existed in North America, perhaps dating back as far as the Sumerian civilizations, if they were not capable of complex thought. Not only that, but the intricate network of Aboriginal beliefs and customs that constituted each unique worldview served spiritual interests, as well as offered a comprehensive approach to general health and well being.<sup>26</sup> This aspect seems to be ignored when examining historical Aboriginal values and practices, especially when it is done by non-aboriginal scholars. For example, the sweat lodge functioned as a place of prayer where numerous social and health concerns were addressed. Indeed, the body's release of endorphins, a result from both sensory deprivation and from the intense heat of the sweat lodge has received widespread recognition in contemporary society for its therapeutic effects. From a traditional perspective, however, the healing process was revered as divine intervention.<sup>27</sup>

While the benefits of this traditional practice are being acknowledged today, the majority of Europeans first dismissed this and many other practices and beliefs as superstition. Had they not approached the different lifestyles and worldviews of Aboriginal people from a condescending stance, today's reality, for both Aboriginals and non-aboriginals, may be very different. Instead, the onslaught of missionary and governmental subjugation on Aboriginal traditions has had devastating consequences. Indeed, the importance of oral legends in an already oral tradition reiterated the importance of these narratives. This is demonstrated in the retention of the Sandy Lake Cree flood legend, as it was maintained orally before being composed in literary form. And although many sacred practices have been lost, many myths and legends have been sustained by keeping the oral tradition alive from one generation to the next. The enduring significance of myth and legend can be appreciated when one considers how the attempts to eradicate traditional spirituality in Aboriginal communities in North America were not as successful as hoped.

For too long now, Western philosophies have dominated in all areas of academia. For a more comprehensive understanding of any subject matter, it may be beneficial if one investigates the author's background to reveal any personal bias and to consider the time period in which it was written. Indeed, the hermeneutics of suspicion and recovery must be applied to publications both in the past and in the present to facilitate a better understanding.<sup>28</sup> While Western philosophy has an established place in academia, what was once considered standard in the Western sense is not applicable to all peoples, cultures, worldviews, etc. Just because something is different does not mean it is wrong. Aboriginal people are capable of doing Western philosophy, enjoying the theories and concepts, just as they are equally capable of discussing their own philosophies. While many Aboriginal people can recognize the truth of this statement, a widely held belief that Indigenous peoples are incapable of engaging in philosophical discourse prevents

us from communicating this truth.<sup>29</sup> Brian Yazzie Burkhart proves this argument is unfounded by comparing propositional knowledge, a Western ideology, to lived experience, a central component in Native philosophy:

In contrast to propositional knowledge, which seems to be designed to outlast us, to take on a life of its own, to be something eternal, knowledge in experience is the kind of knowledge we carry with us. This is the kind of knowledge that allows us to function in the world, to carry on our daily tasks, to live our lives. This knowledge is embodied knowledge. We might do best to call this knowledge "lived knowledge." Whatever we call it, this kind of knowledge is not improved by adding abstract propositional form and is not capable of being justified in the foundational sense and seems to need no such justification.<sup>30</sup>

What is real and what is right for one group of people may not be so for others, and only focusing on similarities will not bridge this gap. For many people, truth, in its various forms, does not need to be proven to be valuable, although it would appear that way when truth is being measured from Western perspectives.<sup>31</sup>

This manner of thinking challenges the very basis of Western philosophy, demonstrating that Aboriginal people are beginning to engage in philosophical discourse within a Western framework. The flood narrative involving Wee-sa-kay-jac also demonstrates that Aboriginal people had well-developed systems of thought that were intimately connected to a larger worldview. Sharing these narratives with the dominant society will open the door for the existence of formal Aboriginal philosophy, which is especially important for those who have had their worldview disrupted. For example, the outcome of literature such as Velma Wallis's *Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival*, in which sacred native concepts and ideals for those who subscribe to them are re-affirmed.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, a person interested in reading a Native legend, not for any religious purpose, but for more of an understanding of the difference in worldview between themselves and Aboriginal people, becomes better acquainted with the intrinsic value of Aboriginal legends.

While some Aboriginal scholars, such as Dale Turner, maintain that these philosophies should remain guarded in our communities, protected from the potential distortion of situating it within a Western framework,<sup>33</sup> this proposal is problematic. Co-existence between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal people must be realized, and the key to this is through understanding and repeating differences in worldview. When oral traditions are used for this purpose, an example being the Sandy Lake Flood legend, it must be remembered that there is a difference between revealing the sacred and sharing the value of the narrative. To ensure the sacred is not trespassed on or disturbed, this must be carefully done by Aboriginal scholars who commit to not misusing this valuable information. This is of the greatest importance because the quest for knowledge has often been associated with progression, as opposed to relationship building. Yet, disturbing colonial pasts reveal that new developments are not always moral achievements, especially when they are undertaken by non-aboriginal people.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, it is time to give credence to Native philosophy, where the "meaning shaping principle" of action is emphasized. This principle recommends that "there is no world, no truth, without meaning and value, and meaning and value arise in the intersection between us and all that is around us."<sup>35</sup> While this is a recognized concept in Aboriginal thought, it has largely been ignored by Western agendas.

Thirsting for new knowledge, one of the most fundamental truths about human existence, which is interconnectedness, has been largely overlooked and denigrated. According to Burkhart:

Western thought, philosophy, and science, have gotten us far, we suppose. We have, through technology, become nearly invincible, but we have forgotten how we are related. We desire what is eternal: eternal life, knowledge that is eternal, truth that is eternal. But are our heads not in the clouds?<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, many people may consider my arguments dangerous and rudimentary, yet others are willing to acknowledge their inherent value. The advent of Canadian multiculturalism has been wrought with friction, and any progress towards an acceptance of religious pluralism is often skewed by criticisms such as “another helping from the Utopian smorgasbord.”<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, it is unfair to debunk this initiative on the grounds that multiculturalism is the only solution for cultural groups to achieve awareness and respect of difference in Canadian society. Secondly, it is plausible that the multicultural ideal has created open mindedness in the generations that truly experienced this phenomenon in the public education setting.<sup>38</sup> While this proposition may seem equally naive, many non-aboriginal students today realize that a problematic representation of Canada’s Indigenous people throughout history has perpetuated harmful concepts that affect how we relate to each another.

Regrettably, many of the unique circumstances Aboriginal people face in life are a result of insubordination that can be traced to European contact. The current social network of our society has resulted in a disparity in the overall health and well being of Aboriginal people. While the progress made at the present date is acknowledged, a multitude of problems continue to exist. To comprehensively understand this dilemma, non-aboriginal people must understand the historical events that have shaped the present day. Education is extremely important for another reason: we need to ensure history does not repeat itself again. A fallacy often committed is assuming that society only moves forward, and not backwards. However, the potential to prove this wrong exists as long as mistakes made in the past are not addressed and analyzed for the purpose of learning a lesson. Indeed, if people are not familiar with the circumstances that resulted in the subordination of Aboriginal people, society runs the risk of repeating previous mistakes, or perpetuating harmful ideas that inhibit successful relations.

By examining our shared history, it becomes obvious that racist government policies and European notions of superiority resulted in the unjust treatment of Aboriginal people. Indeed, many of these inconsistencies stem from a difference in worldview, where a desire for complete understanding on behalf of both parties, even today, is arguable. However, people from diverse backgrounds are interested and willing to engage in discussion where different perceptions of reality and other forms of acquiring knowledge are addressed. When no party assumes superiority, a healthy appreciation for both similarities and differences in worldview can be realized through cross-cultural dialogue. Ultimately, the sharing of Native legends and myths would not only achieve this but would also complement the process, if respect and proper relations, which are central principles, can be learned through examining these narratives.

#### Endnotes

1. As Wee-sa-kay-jac is genderless, reference to this character will be in the form of “it.”

2. Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin. *Old Testament Parallels: Laus and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 26-27; Gns. 6: 11- 8:5 NRSV (New Revised Standard Version); and James R. Stevens. *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 23.
3. Matthews and Benjamin, 27; and Gns. 8: 6-12 NRSV (New Revised Standard Version); and Stevens, 24.
4. Jennifer S. H. Brown and Robert Brightman, eds. *The Orders of the Dreamed: George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 48.
5. Maria Leach, ed. “Myth.” In *Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Standard, 1952), 778.
6. The English translation of Mishipizihw is muskrat.
7. Stevens, 23.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Matthews and Benjamin, 28.
10. Gns. 6: 5 NRSV.
11. Information obtained from a Brandon University lecture offered by Dr. Peter Horden, *Ancient Judaism* (Fall 2004).
12. The first five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.
13. Stevens, 6.
14. Pierre Grimal, ed. “Babylon.” In *Larousse World Mythology* (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 63.
15. *Ibid.*, 56.
16. A recent trend in academia has attempted to stop this forced coercion of acknowledging Christianity as supreme by converting B.C. to B.C.E., implying time before the Common Era, and C.E., of the Common Era. For further discussion, see “Common Era,” *Wikipedia*.
17. Jesuit relations.
18. V. F. Cordova. “Approaches to Native American Philosophy.” In *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 31.
19. For an example, see V.F. Cordova’s identification and challenge of J. Baird Callicott’s Eurocentric agenda in “ECOINDIAN: A Response to J. Baird Callicott,” *Ayaangwaamizin: The International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1997): 31-44.
20. Cordova, 31.
21. Lee Maracle. *I Am Woman* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1996), 82.
22. Cordova, 31.
23. *Ibid.*, 31-32.
24. Jesuits.
25. Denys Delage and Helen Hornbeck. “The Ojibwa-Jesuit Debate at Walpole Island, 1844,” *Ethnohistory* 41, no. 2 (1994): 295.
26. Naomi Adelson. *‘Being Alive Well,’ Health and the Politics of Cree Well-being* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000).
27. James B. Waldram, D. Ann Herring, and T. Kue Young. *Aboriginal Health in Canada*, 2nd edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 140-41.
28. Paul Ricouer. *Freud and Philosophy: An essay on interpretation*, translated by Denis Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 32-36.
29. See Vine Deloria, Jr., *The Metaphysics of Existence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), and Cordova, 31.
30. Brian Yazzie Burkhart. “What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us: An Outline of American Indian Epistemology.” In *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 20.
31. *Ibid.*

32. See Velma Wallis, *Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival* (Alaska: Epicenter Press, 1993), and David Young et al., *Cry of the Eagle: Encounters with a Cree Healer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
33. Dale Turner. "Oral Traditions and the Politics of (Mis)Recognition." In *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 237, and *This Is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).
34. See Thomas R. Berger, *A Long and Terrible Shadow: White Values, Native Rights in the Americas 1492-1992* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1991); Jack D. Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals* (New York: Autonomedia, 1992); and Paulo Friero, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).
35. Burkhardt, 16-17.
36. *Ibid.*, 26.
37. Marie Battiste and Jean Barman, eds. *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 60.
38. Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliott. *Unequal Relations: An Introduction to Race, Ethnic, and Aboriginal Dynamics in Canada, 3rd edition* (Scarborough: Prentice Hall, 1992), 295.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### *This Is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*

Dale Turner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

Reviewed by Ryan Bruyere  
*University of Winnipeg*

Dale Turner, an Anishinabe academic, opens and articulates the changed perception of the just relationship Canada assumes over its Aboriginal populations. Turner highlights the fact that liberalism and its failed peace pipes are a cause for concern. From an Aboriginal perspective he dispels liberalism and its failed peace pipes for four reasons:

1. the legacy of colonialism is not addressed;
2. they do not respect the *sui generis* nature of indigenous rights;
3. Canada's claim to sovereignty is not questioned; and
4. most importantly, they do not recognize that a meaningful theory of Aboriginal rights in Canada is impossible without Aboriginal participation. (7)

It is clear that liberalism does fall short in its assessment of the Aboriginal identity and political rights discourse. I would agree that Turner's first three critiques are crucial in assessing liberalism's account of Aboriginal rights, but my crucial response is to Turner's participation outlook. He shares his view of Aboriginal Participation as

The process of critically undermining colonialism and returning Aboriginal voices to their rightful place in the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state. ...Aboriginal voices must participate in the Canadian legal and political practices that determine the meaning of Aboriginal rights. (31)

Is it necessary to participate within the mainstream? If Aboriginal rights are given through their historic nationhood status, then what is the validity of asserting them through a foreign dialogue? Aboriginal rights are not given. They are inherent through the great creator and the peace pipe! In terms of mainstream Canadian participation, there is a Mohawk proverb (Two Row Wampum) that guides my understanding: "You can't stand with one foot in two canoes." Either you are Mohawk or Anishinabeg, or Canadian. There is no middle ground.

Turner contends there is a problem with incorporating Aboriginal understandings within the hostile legal and political discourses of Aboriginal rights. I agree with this because what Aboriginal rights became in a contemporary sense differs from the inherent perspective of the Indigenous worldviews. Today they are constituted by a foreign framework and have been since the Royal Proclamation of 1763. We, as First Nations, have to dismantle that colonial assumption of authority over Indians before we discuss further colonial barrages, such as the Constitution Act (Section 35).

He discusses the principles of the White Paper very passionately. He says that White Paper liberalism acts as a reality check for Aboriginals. He uses the same emotion that past intellectuals have shown in regards to this unilateral amendment to the Indian Act in 1969. I think that is where he lost my interest because after the White Paper's demise there was more restrained participation within the Constitution Act proceedings of 1982. Therefore, Turner's perceived need for participation was soothed to a certain degree. I think participation within the mainstream began after the demise of the White Paper, and that the White Paper is at the core of the Aboriginal rights movement within the mainstream as represented in post-Calder rulings, self-government agreements, and land claims. But is it ours?

Turner critiques Cairns and Kymlicka in chapters two and three for their marred solution to the White Paper's shortcomings because they fail to include Aboriginal participation in their understandings. According to Kymlicka, Aboriginal people are automatically participants through their Canadian status as political minorities. I see a problem with Turner's critique and Kymlicka's theory. First, why is Turner fixated on right-wing ignorance? They will continue to misinterpret our worldviews for generations to come. The settler existence in Turtle Island is founded upon deceit and a misunderstanding of indigenous beliefs, institutions, and worldviews. As for Kymlicka's automatic Canadian status (i.e., assimilation), that is the end result of liberalism. So, Kymlicka is fantasizing about fitting Aboriginal peoples into Canada's liberal society a bit prematurely. We are not now, nor will we ever be Canadians. Of course, I am speaking from an Anishinabe perspective. My stance on a coerced Canadian identity is somewhat shared by Turner through his nationhood approach.

Dale Turner's word warrior notion fails to incorporate any indigeneity, the term he uses as survival. His word warriors will create more factionalism and elitism in Aboriginal communities. How can a word warrior be chosen to participate in the legal and political discourse without a post-secondary education or a foreign landscape? He is supporting liberalism in his efforts to empower our people! Turner assumes that we need empowerment. He immediately wrote off the majority of his people with his warrior outlook: "...by engaging in a political dialogue, they will at least be able to speak for themselves" (79). What about community affairs? Participating in mainstream institutions is crucial to that he forgets about our backyard problems, which ultimately need help first. He says word warriors are the "class" of Indigenous people that will make inroads into the dominant culture. Turner's accounts do not necessarily defend liberalism, but he tries to introduce change and create understanding for non-Aboriginal people. He does not know it, but he is thinking like a liberal philosopher!

...I am not claiming that Aboriginal ways of knowing the world are incommensurable with the legal and political discourses of the state. I am claiming that Aboriginal people must be more cautious about what they do with their ways of knowing the world, and especially how they develop legal and political strategies for asserting, defending, and protecting the

rights, sovereignty, and nationhood they still believe they possess. (73)

As an Anishinabe, I see a problem with this belief about possession. Nobody gives you sovereignty; you exercise it! And to defend the pseudo-Aboriginal ideal of looking at the world is wrong. There is no such thing as an Aboriginal or an Aboriginal worldview to assert. Does he mean the numerous Inuit or Metis communities, or the diverse First Nation population? What Aboriginalism is, is unclear. He states that Aboriginals will have to convince the dominant culture of the legitimacy of their claims. No wonder mainstream institutions are not listening to our claims!

To further Turner's claims, a reconciliation of sorts must happen to engage a network (intellectual community) of word warriors. They should use their indigenous ways of knowing the world. Indigenous philosophies are rooted in the oral traditions and the way they see the world. Turner does not share his worldview with his readers, other than a brief reference to the pipe carrier and the medicine society of the Midewewin. His language falls short of providing the true understandings of indigeneity and sovereignty.

"...(W)e are far from being recognized as what the commission calls 'partners in confederation'" (87). Turner uses the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) context in his explanation of partners, but is RCAP relevant? Is recognition his goal? Or does he see as necessary intervention from within the state on behalf of Aboriginal rights? Either way, partners in a whole is the main argument I see in terms of a "just" relationship. For instance, the Treaty Commission of Manitoba is now exploring and deconstructing the lost partnership of the numerous treaties with Canada and the First Nations. It is not a perfect model because it, too, is an agent of the state, but at least discussion has begun on treaty interpretation.

Turner sums up his inadequate attempt to make possible the survival of our people: "*As a matter of survival*, Aboriginal intellectuals must engage the non-Aboriginal intellectual landscapes from which their political rights and sovereignty are articulated and put to use in Aboriginal communities" (90). Again, this is in direct conflict with my opinion of where Anishinabe rights flow from. He asserts that we must conform to their system for effective change; however, there are numerous problems with conformity and accepting a place within their systems. This conformity will inevitably be more damaging to our societies. You cannot expect word warriors or conformists to be our leaders. That would be more detrimental than the status quo. They will not change anything within that system. They will only change themselves!

Like those of pipe carriers, the duties and responsibilities of word warriors will be extensive: like pipe carriers word warriors will be extensive; like pipe carriers, word warriors will best be chosen carefully. ...How should Indigenous peoples be thinking about the necessary division of intellectual labor that, I believe, is required in order for indigenous peoples to survive *as distinct peoples?* (93)

Word warriors cannot be chosen under indigenous values. Did anyone have a vision or a dream of a word warrior as the next chosen representative? Did spirituality guide the word warrior premise? Was a word warrior raised from birth knowing that he/she must retain this role? I do not think so. To explain, I will use the pipe. When engaged spiritually, the pipe acts as a connector between the many worlds and the heavens. Balance is the key for indigenous survival—a trait exemplified by the pipe. When both male and female counterparts are connected,

it resembles a cross, or the four directions. But Turner forgets about the balance and implies that intellectualism is our new pipe or connector. This is without a doubt inconsistent with indigenous worldviews because intellectualism, in Turner's view, is certified by an outside institution, namely, a university education that is insensitive to our worldviews.

A pipe carrier is proficient in all the community's oral teachings and exhibits the totality of spirituality, wisdom, truth, and is chosen by the elders as leader or representative to carry the pipe for the people. The pipe carrier interacts with the many worlds and in ceremony is the real chosen spokesperson, not only in diplomacy but in spiritualism. How can Turner discuss the concept of a pipe carrier while dispelling its origin-nationhood and spiritualism! Pipe carriers are word warriors in every sense, but according to Turner the latter is unacceptable within the dominant culture. Pipe carriers are true representatives of their nations; the same could not be said about a quasi-intellectual community! The quasi-intellectual community approach is not warranted because in my community of Sagkeeng First Nation the intellectual community remains at a distance from the people, usually in band management or residing off reserve with no desire to return. Not all intellectuals are segregating themselves. Some have returned home and done wonderful work within the community. But, overall, there is an attitude of elitism that is ingrained during their post secondary "intellectual training."

Turner's word warriors would be wasting their time and effort in fighting an uphill battle towards recognition of delegated authority from the non-Aboriginal legal and political discourses. Word warriors should focus on a network of community intellects that stay focused on internal matters. They would be more useful as educators in our inferior school systems, or for the community as a whole in terms of the Aboriginal rights discourse.

*This Is Not a Peace Pipe* is so obsessed with Aboriginalism and defeatism that its own purpose is defeated. Aboriginalism is a created false political entity that is used to undermine our nation status. His own philosophy is not even indigenous in nature. For example, he reiterates his stance: "A critical indigenous philosophy must unpack the colonial framework of these discourses, assert and defend our "indigeneity" within the dominant culture, and defend the legal and political integrity of indigenous communities" (95-96). Basically he is defending what was created by the same institutions: dependency, generic identities, and the onus of fixing an Indian problem.

Turner asks: "How do we explain our differences and in the process empower ourselves?" I respond: You can begin by letting *them* correct the "so-called" Indian problem on their own. After all, they created the Indian. I feel that word warriors should not have to highlight or advocate change within a foreign perception because that diminishes their role in an intellectual community. They should be committed to development and not finger pointing. Leave that role up to our so-called leaders, who are good at the blame game.

Turner has one foot in two canoes and is ready to drown. For instance, his critical indigenous philosophy involves taking up, deconstructing, and resisting colonialism, protecting and defending indigeneity, and engaging the legal and political discourses of the state. He is very correct to say we need to resist colonialism and defend our identity as indigenous people, but he shatters his vision with the last comment—engage the legal and political discourses of the state. Does that mean we have to become Canadians or Canindians? Again, you can't have it both ways: either you're a Mohawk or Anishinabeg or Canadian!

The liberal tradition is our enemy. We need to break away from the factional aspects that liberalism applies to our

nations. There needs to be a decolonization approach because decolonization in itself is a way of thinking, a philosophy that he ignores. Internal healing would be the desired result of this way of thinking. We have to look back at our sacred teachings, places, and ancestors. We will never move forward in any institution, not even our own, without embracing our past and, more crucially, our identity as Anishinabeg.

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## ***This Is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy***

Dale Turner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

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Dale Turner's book *This Is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy* represents a first step towards answering fundamental questions about Aboriginal justice discourses within Canada from an Aboriginal perspective. Turner's criticisms of liberalism can be easily understood from within the Western philosophic tradition although it is informed by an Aboriginal perspective. The book has two main thrusts. The bulk of the book is concerned with a critique of liberal responses to the "Aboriginal problem." Included in this critique is a chapter on The White Paper, a chapter on Alan Cairns' idea of *citizens plus*, and a chapter on Will Kymlicka and what Turner refers to as "Kymlicka's constraint" (58). The second part of the book is an argument for the creation of a class of Aboriginal thinkers who would be called "word warriors." In this review, I want to discuss Turner's understanding of Kymlicka's constraint and explain why Turner would posit a class of word warriors to deal with the specific problems implied by it.

The breadth of Turner's criticisms of liberalism seems to imply that, even if liberal academics have a good will when they try to understand Aboriginal arguments for self government, they fail because they are unable or unwilling to see the world from an Aboriginal worldview. Turner argues that

Indigenous peoples have their own philosophies, which they apply when articulating their understanding[s] of the world. Indigenous philosophies are rooted in oral traditions, which generate explanations of the world expressed in indigenous normative languages. But the legal and political discourses of the state do not use indigenous philosophies to justify their legitimacy. The asymmetry arises because indigenous peoples must use the normative language of the dominant culture to ultimately defend world views that are embedded in completely different normative frameworks. (81)

Turner suggests that this difficulty can be solved by having a specialist "class" that can function at high levels in both communities. These word warriors must, "instead of carving out their own communities and asserting their intellectual sovereignty within them...develop a community of practitioners *within* the existing dominant legal and political intellectual communities, while remaining an essential part of a thriving indigenous intellectual community" (90). This role of informed mediator is essential to solving the problems presented by Kymlicka's constraint and the differences between Aboriginal and liberal worldviews.

According to Turner, liberal theory tends to see Aboriginal rights as special rights and is opposed to anything that creates an uneven playing field. For Turner, liberalism can be defined

as a system of thinking that privileges the individual as the fundamental moral unit and as a system that is concerned with the relationship of freedom and equality between individuals (13). According to Turner's understanding of Kymlicka's constraint, Aboriginal rights will not be fully recognized within Canada until Aboriginal intellectuals can show that their rights do not compete with liberalism but are an essential part of liberal practice within Canada. Kymlicka's constraint is premised on the realization that Aboriginal peoples do not have political power within Canada. It is predominantly non-Aboriginals who get to decide what will occur in Canada both politically and within academic institutions, and, as such, Aboriginals must make their cases appealing to non-Aboriginals. Making a case for Aboriginal rights that fits into liberal theory and is consistent with Aboriginal perspective(s) is a difficult task and one that can only be achieved through a dialogue between equal participants from both worldviews. However, the real difficulty arises because Aboriginal ways of knowing are not treated as equal to Western ways of knowing within Canadian thought and law, and these discussions do not occur in Aboriginal languages.

Aboriginal participation in these discussions is necessary because liberal thought, no matter how well intentioned, has not succeeded as a peace pipe. In his criticism of Liberalism, Turner concedes that all three forms of liberal thought discussed in the book are concerned with improving the state of Aboriginal peoples within Canada. Flanagan stands out as a White Paper liberal who does not have the best interest of Aboriginal peoples at heart in his assimilation policies, and even Flanagan would argue that his assimilationist argument is really being made for the betterment of Aboriginal peoples. However, all of these White Paper liberalisms fall short of being a peace pipe because liberal theorists appear to be pronouncing what is best for Aboriginal peoples without Aboriginal participation. From an Aboriginal perspective, a just consensus can only be arrived at through a dialogue that produces a sacred agreement. Liberal thought that comes after the White Paper, with the notable exception of RCAP (1996), does not listen to Aboriginal voices and does not try to come to mutual understandings. By doing so, they may produce good work that helps reform a system and creates a more just place for Aboriginal peoples within Canada, but they do not create peace pipes based on shared understandings between cultures. It may be possible that a liberal theory, informed by a well-explained Aboriginal perspective that comes from the word warriors, will be able to create understandings of Aboriginal rights that are both acceptable within liberal thought and an Aboriginal perspective. To do this, there would have to be a bridging of horizons between the two worldviews that would be based on a mutual respect for each other. What is needed is the creation of a space for discussions among equals that will lead to a mutual understanding of each other's positions and will lead to a shared commitment to a set of Aboriginal rights.

The task of creating the space for the creation of a peace pipe would fall on the word warriors who would be engaged with their native communities while working within the power structure of the dominant culture as lawyers, politicians, and academics. Although word warriors would exist in both worlds, their allegiance would be with Aboriginal peoples and their work would be to advance the political goals of Aboriginal peoples in communities they are already a part of. As Turner later puts the issue, the word warrior would be intimately familiar with the dominant culture while remaining a citizen of indigenous nations (119). They must remain citizens of indigenous nations

[b]ecause their actions in the world have repercussions in their communities, [so] they need to be accountable

to their people. Word warriors function in the secular world of global politics and ideas, yet their actions are guided by both indigenous and non-indigenous ways of understanding the world. (119)

Yet, we have to ask if it is possible to work in both worldviews in the way that Turner is suggesting. If word warriors stay within the Western academic or political world for too long, at what point will they no longer be using the "master's tools" while believing them to be wrong? And at what point will the master's tools become their own? For example, part of the language issue is a belief that the language we speak in shapes how we think. If word warriors spend most of their time talking to English scholars in English, how long will it be before using English will start to shape how they view the world? Also, if there were Aboriginal scholars who were passionate about their peoples but were not traditional and were not attached to their communities, could they be word warriors? I am concerned that being a "word warrior" will be seen as being an "authentic" Aboriginal scholar and that those Aboriginals who do not do scholarship that is like the work done by word warriors will be seen as "apples" or as not real "Indians."

Overall, despite the troubling "authenticity" discourse this book presents, it is a wonderful book that both introduces an exciting concept into the discourse and presents a striking critique of White Paper Liberalism from an Aboriginal perspective. I hope that this text will soon become a standard in university classrooms and will be read by anyone who wants to think seriously about justice issues within Canada. Moreover, this book needs a companion volume that does not just take up a negative case against liberalism but posits a positive thesis from an Aboriginal perspective that philosophers can work with. The clarity and success of the Two Row Wampum argument in this text shows that Aboriginal thought can be well explained in English and what is needed is a word warrior like Turner to explain the subtleties of Aboriginal thought to Western philosophers so that we can keep searching for common ground.