

WHOSE STORY IS IT? THE CONSTRUCTION AND PRESENTATION OF HISTORY.

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OPSOMMING

Historie, of dan die storie van menslike gebeure, is 'n universele menslike aktiwiteit. Wat is die basisbeginsels waarop hierdie narratief vertel word, die hoek van die vertelling, die perspektief? Wie se storie is historie? Daar word allerweë aanvaar dat twee van die vaste beginsels van die dissipline Geskiedenis **objektiwiteit** en **kritiese beoordeling** is. In hierdie artikel wil ek probeer aantoon dat dié twee beginsels in 'n groot mate 'n denkparadigma van kolonialisering veronderstel. Sodanige aanvaarding van 'n oorsigtelike en universele waarheid is niks anders nie as 'n selfgeïmponeerde, ondemokratiese vooropstelling. Ek verduidelik my teoretiese tese van hierdie denkparadigma en metodologie aan die hand van 'n spesifieke voorbeeld en die proses waarin en –deur dit manifesteer. Ek kies 'n baie spesifieke gedeelte van die VSA-geskiedenis, vanaf 1865—1890, die “laaste” van die sogenaamde Indiaanoorloë in die VSA en die nederlaag van die laaste Negeramerikaanse groep wat onafhanklik van Europese dominasie was.

History, or the telling of human events, is an universal human activity. While the so-called modern techniques of historical inquiry are a **very** recent development, the “knowing” of the human past seems to be, has been, **is** an essential characteristic of people’s lives. All societies have “produced” a past; that past is inseparable from the present and an inescapable influence on the future. I believe that those of us who are and proudly call ourselves historians believe, feel, even live this “dictum”. We agree, and know that Marx was more than just observing a reality when he called history the mother of all disciplines.

Indeed, the telling of history is so significant and fundamental to human enterprise and understanding that we historians engage in great debates, even conflicts, about the “truths” of history. We realize that the results of our debate (at any point of the process) has a critical and severe impact on the society of which we are

part. Even as others take our efforts (or ignore them) and distort or manipulate its inquiry for many agendas, we still endeavour to remain above or beyond these machinations and do **our** work, conscious of, but separate from “their” battleground. We struggle to produce the most accurate and comprehensive description and analysis of human society as possible.

What are the standards (for indeed there must be such) that we depend upon? I would offer two that are so often presented as paramount: objectivity and critical judgment. To be objective is to seek the “facts” and have them speak for themselves, to remove from our inquiry the bias(es) of race, gender, class, and culture; in other words, our own personal and group identities. In “escaping” these impediments we must utilize that other so important standard of critical judgment. What we (or I) ultimately present is a selection of what is necessary, or what I decide is necessary for (to repeat myself) the most accurate and comprehensive description and analysis of whatever we are attempting to understand.

But — there is another point or question whose answer offers (for me) a most troubling challenge to our avocation. By what example have we evaluated and understood these goals and standards? Perhaps I should add another question — who has constructed and presented the “telling” that we have depended upon in our attempts to know and understand? In the West, in the United States, the answers are resounding: the story-teller, the accessible historian, has been white, elite, eurocentric, heterosexual, Christian, and male. If this description is more than just an observation, then I am indeed perplexed. Another question vexes me: Did not the white, elite, Eurocentric heterosexual, Christian male invade, conquer, kill, and enslaves millions of non-white, etc., etc., people to achieve his (their) present circumstance? Of course, I know this from the “telling” that I have received from the white, elite,... O I must pause and describe the annoyance of having to use these adjectives/nouns, but I am supposed to be accurate and comprehensive in my telling of history ... am I not? And I certainly know that historically very, very, few (if any) non-white, non-elite, non-heterosexual, non-Christian, non-male historians, or some mix of these characteristics, have enjoyed

access and influence in my profession and in my society's "remembrance" of its past.

Forgive my obvious, and perhaps, poor use of parody. But it is not interesting and amazing at how out dialog, discussion, and critical assessment immediately alters when we stop "presenting" our construction as if the historian or tellers had or have no identity — or when the assumed bias(es) may be recognized as more than just minor annoyances that can be dismissed and separated from our critical inquiry and the presentation of such. Do we not (although only recently) agree that each of these signifiers (race, gender, sex, class, culture and religion) has been and still are factors that determine the political, economic, social structures and relationships of every human society? Do we not also understand, especially as historians engaged in that truth-quest that these signifiers have been mostly, virtually, **unsated** components of the Western "story". Are not those who are the progeny of the dominant race, class, gender, etc., and who "learn" this history subject to believe/understand that "their" story is Universal? I would offer to you that these "identities" have been at the centre of what is for many (certainly in the United States) an empire, and for many more, an imposed empire. Just as the Conquistador, Puritan, French, and Dutch traders invaded and conquered the Americas, so has the "story" of that conquest been shaped, configured or reconfigured to "accurately" represent a conqueror's construction. And the historian/intellectual has often replace the soldier, or missionary, or trader to create the museum of **their** stories that replace "the truth of the peoples" destroyed. The survivors and descendants of that history must now accept that "accurate, objective, comprehensive, universal" account.

I will now present a specific example of this paradigm and the process it manifests. I choose a very specific portion of US history, from 1865—1890, the "last" of the so-called Indian wars in the US and the defeat of the last Native American group independent of European domination, the Eurocentric-named Plains People. I will offer a comparison of what I believe to be the most accurate assessment of that time with the "museum" piece that is the most accepted, that is, "historical" truth of America's past [However, before I proceed, I must state/locate my own "identity". I am

Mexicano, Chicano Tejano — I am of Mexican origin (Mexicano). I embrace my indigenous legacy as opposed to the Spanish-European invader (Chicano); I am from Texas (Tejano). I have been “named” by an Anishinabe, Ojibway medicine person as Shangwaukoonz (Bitter Pine) and my totems or clans are Wolf and Eagle.]

Dee Brown, Stephan Ambrose and Ian Frazier, prominent historians of the 19th Century United States, have described this period of invasion “expansion” and conquest as the most rapid change of a “place” and a society in World History. The changes in population, the increase of European peoples and the subjugation of the land and its indigenous inhabitants included concomitant levels of death and destruction. This time and history created a permanent legacy that is as much about the European’s determination to kill and destroy as it is about the “remarkable” developments in technology and industry.

However, the typical popular white, Eurocentric, Christian, heterosexual conception is quite different than the above. It was a great time of expansion and growth that unfortunately harmed/destroyed another culture, but that also represents the most noble aspects of American greatness. (This view is only very recently and significantly challenged by a few US historians.)

The Native American, as a result of their own history and understanding of the land, developed a philosophy of the infinite in space **and** time, a cycle of movement that both changed and involved all things with no spiritual distinction between life as animate or inanimate. All was part of creation; ownership (certainly in the European sense) was absurd and impossible. Conflict was present between peoples, but not on the basis of race, religion or accumulation. The resolution of such depended on preserving this cycle of being.

The European also “saw” the land as infinite, but in terms of space, and the movement of “time” was to advance the conquest of the land. Any one not part of this ambition was called indigenous. As with the first European invaders, any means of accumulation was justified, including the killing of those who resisted (or who were just in the way). The Christian philosophy

placed God at the pinnacle and man (human beings) superior over all earth-bound forms. As one rightly assumes most of the practitioners of dispossession and genocide were of the extermination did so within the parameters of the 'tragedy' of a noble but pagan and inferior race who inevitably must give way. The major "events" of this time had little to do with unfortunate excess, e.g., the slaughter of the buffalo, but with calculation of the understood result. As General of the Western Armies, Philip Sheridan stated, the Indian was dependent on the buffalo — kill it and the Indian problem would be gone. Or, as Frederick Douglas understood, the Christian nation developed a consensus that the aboriginal population should die out.

Again, the typical WECH conception/version is quite different: The "frontier" allowed the full expression of the great American creed which included Democracy, Individualism, Liberty and Freedom. Its development created a paradise out of a desert and inevitably replaced a primitive (albeit) noble people with the most intelligent and morally advanced society in World History. The idea of this Frontier Thesis, organized and presented by professional historian Frederick Jackson Turner at the American Association meeting of 1893, permeates the construction and the perpetuation of the myth of the American West. That myth did not occupy the motivations of the European Americans, particularly the young white males who replaced many regular army personnel during the Civil War. These young militia had one overriding ambition, to rid "their" land of the indigenous inhabitants by extermination. The regular army itself relentlessly pursued whatever Native American refused to be imprisoned within the reservation system after 1865. The numerous "victories" in war were mostly atrocities on defenceless villages and yet the American people, i.e., the European Americans in the West, increased their demand for complete removal of these "dogs in our manger". The Battle of the Little Big Horn and its aftermath is perhaps the most concrete and symbolic event of the reality and the created myth.

The battle of Greasy Grass (Lakota name for what Europeans came to call the Battle of Little Big horn) occurred in July, 1876. The Lakota, Oglala, Cheenne, Hunkpapa, Arapaho and other Native American tribes had come together in reaction to the final

“great” US Army campaign against their freedom. Pressured by gold-seekers, industrialists, and unemployed workers of the Panic of 1873, the usual scapegoat tactics were intensified. Colonel George Armstrong Custer led an army expedition in 1874 to **find** gold in the final refuge known as Paha Sapa, or the Black Hills. This small area of land was the centre of the spiritual universe for several indigenous people, but that was inconsequential to white groups. The Custer success provides the impetus to “break” the treaty of 1868 and permit white people into this sacred ground. In December of 1875, US President Grant ended “negotiations” with some Native American groups and ordered all “Indians” in the Black Hills to vacate in 60 days or be expelled by the military. This set the stage for what would become the world famous event called “Custer’s Last Stand”.

In the summer of 1876, the US Army, especially the 7th Cavalry was ordered to pursue and destroy. Custer, the 7th Cavalry commander and one of the “boy generals” of the Civil War and a glamorous public hero, was sure that his 600 men could destroy any number of Native Americans. Most of his earlier “victories” were dawn attacks on undefended villages, with massive numerical advantage. On July 26, 1876, he attacked with three split units the largest camp/village his scouts had ever seen. The result was that all of his units were defeated. In his own unit every soldier, including Custer, was killed. The event immediately became described in the white press as “Custer’s Last Stand”. By the account of Native American warriors in the “battle” there was no last stand, only a desperate chaotic retreat with a quick result, or as one of the two principal Native American leaders put it: “Custer was a fool and rode to his death” (Sitting Bull). But George Armstrong Custer became a symbol of the heroic frontier. The indigenous people who were defending their land **authorized by treaty** were ruthlessly pursued, captured, forced to retreat, or slaughtered. The “last stand” became a metaphor in literature (and later the US Cinema and the Eurocentric consciousness) for the “winning” of the west and the noble, but often tragic sacrifices demanded from the American pioneers. In 1883, Buffalo Bill Cody opened his first Wild West Show, and the mythology of the romantic, Noble Savage began. With only 200 surviving buffalo (of

60 million, 20 years before), cattle were dressed as buffalo. In 1885, Sitting Bull was employed by Cody and the "Last Stand" became a performance of the Wild West Show. (Sitting Bull gave most of his salary to poor whites in the cities and left after one season.)

The "capstone" moment of this twenty-five years occurred in 1890. After US government/reservation officials in South Dakota prohibited the practice of the "Ghost Dance", 300 Native Americans left their "designated" residence. The "Ghost Dance" itself was a ritual to rerun the old days and the old ways with no threat to whites, who nonetheless chose to regard it as a potential new "Indian War". Surrounded by 500 US soldiers, the band of 300 (mostly women, children and elders) was slaughtered by rifle and small cannon fire; twenty-four soldiers were killed, mostly by their own cross-fire! This became known as the "Battle of Wounded Knee"; twenty-four white male soldiers received the highest decoration; — the army unit was the Seventh Cavalry — the region the hero of the Last Stand.

Return to my statement of identity as Chicano-Tejano, named by the Anishinabe Ojibway and please consider this. The above analysis/description is simply absent from the learning and consciousness of European-origin Americans. While a few white historians have attempted to present this very different description of the history of American society, most of their colleagues label such challenge to the dominant racial and cultural mythology as "politically correct", political advocacy, creation of self-myth, or just "bad history". Did any of you, or all of you have a reaction to my declaration of who I am? Does it affect my paper? Did you listen differently? Was there any assumption that I was violating or possibly forgetting those "standards" of historical inquiry? Was there any sense that perhaps I was presenting a bias rather than "objective" analysis? Did anyone think that perhaps I might have more insight because of my identity?

The language that I and we use is not separate from our world-views. When I present my Anishinabe name, I do not simply provide a word by which one many address me. In indigenous/Native American life I present to you a spiritual

recognition given or “remembered” by those who have earned the people’s trust and respect for their spiritual gifts. When I use the term genocide, I do not present a calculated analysis of “objective” inquiry. I give to you what Paula Gunn Allen calls the “memory” of indigenous peoples in the Americas (to use Western techniques, from twelve to twenty million in North America in 1500 to approximately **250 000** by 1865). I also present too that if Native American people carry that memory, so must European origin Americans — but the “memories” are very different — are they not? If (and I do) present an analysis of **inevitability** of the mega destruction of the indigenous people of North America, I do not use that concept (inevitably) with the popular meaning in the Western version of US history, i.e. Progress and Primitive. I use it as a result of my (and the many indigenous scholars with a few European-origin colleagues) understanding that the racial consciousness, cultural conceit and religious beliefs of the European invader had determined that extermination was acceptable, if necessary, and that the non-Christian, non-white, non-European peoples had no “right” to resist **that** inevitability.

I would use one more example of “whose story is it”? In April of 1995, the federal US government building in Oklahoma City was destroyed by a terrorist bomb and approximately 160 innocent people were murdered — women, children, men; wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, grandparents and friends. The reaction of horrors, confusion, anger, fear, even guilt by many of the survivors was showed by all Americans, and many around the world. The President of the United States at a memorial service, spoke of this moment as unique in American history, but one that all Americans would denounce and one that should never happen again — and because most Americans were united against this kind of violence, would not happen again. In 1890, surviving Native American people of the Plains knew more people who had died in their lifetimes than whose still living. In the 19th Century, virtually every indigenous nation in North America experienced the “uniqueness” of Oklahoma City; and one event did not preclude another. No, there was nothing unique in American history about the hatred and murder and “innocent” victims of Oklahoma City, just a difference

in who the victims were. Of course, I and indigenous people are also aware that our “memory” and story had/has virtually no impact on the observers, commentators, and public understanding of Oklahoma City, Hate, Violence and Murder.

Indeed, Whose Story Is It?