Teaching on Stolen Ground

Deborah A. Miranda

This essay is a mosaic of my thoughts and experiences as an American Indian at the beginning of her fourth year as a professor. I dedicate the whole made from these shards to the memory of Gloria Anzaldúa, who taught—and still teaches—so many of us how to survive and thrive in the Borderlands with courage, compassion, and sensual delight for the energy of being alive.

It happens every year. This time one of my blond, blue-eyed male first-year students stomps into my classroom, saying to the group at large, “I’m changing my ethnicity to Native American so I can get free college tuition. They don’t have to prove anything, just check ‘Indian’ on the form, and it’s a free ride all the way.” As a Native American professor with $50,000 in student loans, who teaches in a university that—like all universities in North and South America—is built on Indian land, this student’s statement makes me a little crazy. This is where I teach from: an occupied country. My university resides on land stolen from local indigenous peoples—but we rarely talk about that reality in our classrooms or question how that theft continues to impact our daily lives as U.S. citizens. In this essay, I’ll attempt to re-create my pedagogical and gut responses to this academia-wide state of affairs—responses, not necessarily “solutions.” My purpose is not to write a “how to” guide; instead, I want to communicate, as honestly as possible, the tensions and negotiations that happen among my body, place, and the academy.
Placing the Academy

Reality Check 101

My students come to me, for the most part, conditioned and educated by our culture to think of this land as always already “American.” As the mother of two children nearing the end of their public school educations, I can attest to the rampant and “unintentional” racism, particularly anti-Indian sentiment, present in curriculums from preschool through high school—so I’m not surprised by the lack of information, and the presence of misinformation, that undergraduates bring to the academy. Manifest Destiny is alive and well and living inside our children. In the case of the student quoted at the top of this essay, my first thought was, “Do you have any idea what that ‘free’ education cost? In land, in lives, in health, in emotional well-being, in wealth?” What came out of my mouth was, “Have you ever heard of the Medicine Creek Treaty?” No one had. So we learned.

First, the official version: we read a typical report such as that found under “Medicine Creek Treaty” at HistoryLink.org (the online encyclopedia of Washington State history):

The Treaty of Medicine Creek was signed on December 26, 1854, at a meeting at Medicine Creek in present-day Thurston County. Sixty-two leaders of major Western Washington tribes, including the Nisqually and Puyallup, signed the treaty with Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens (1818–1862). The tribes ceded most of their lands in exchange for $32,500, designated reservations, and the permanent right of access to traditional hunting and fishing grounds.

The bands and tribes signing the treaty were the Nisqually, Puyallup, Steilacoom, Squaxin, S’Homamish, Ste-chass, T’Peek-sin, Squi-aitl, and Sahheh-mamish. Yes, some of these Indians still exist as tribal entities, some still have reservation lands, and some of the original “signers” of the treaty received some of the money they were promised (hunting and fishing rights remain contested to this day). Why persist in labeling the land as stolen? Looking further, my students sought out alternative sources such as Thomas Bjorgen and Morris Uebelacker, who point out in their 2001 report (commissioned by Washington State and the treaty tribes), “Determination of the Southern Boundary of the Medicine Creek Treaty Ceded Area,” that exchanging 2.5 million acres for $35,000,
Teaching on Stolen Ground

undesirable lands, and hunting/fishing rights that were and are constantly disputed is not what most would call a fair deal. In particular, the pressure that the tribes were under at that time (a state of war and invasion) made resisting this treaty seem unwise to tribes that had already lost thousands of lives to disease, racial violence, and malnutrition. According to David M. Buerge, "The twenty-thousand-odd aboriginal inhabitants who were assumed to be in rapid decline were given a brutal choice: they would adapt to white society or they could disappear" (73). Thirty-five thousand dollars, students noted, wouldn’t go very far among 20,000 Indians.

Then my students discovered that the tribes present at the signing were not even actual representatives of their people; Bjorgen and Uebelacker’s report reveals that “rather, Governor Stevens united various bands and villages into larger tribal entities for purposes of reaching agreement to the Treaty” (2). Basically, Stevens gathered up as many people from local tribes as he could find and literally appointed them chiefs and headmen with the “authority” to sign away these lands on a treaty.

And finally, my students realized, these appointed Indians were not honestly apprised of the vast amount of land they were being asked to sign over. Again, Bjorgen and Uebelacker provided key information: not only was the treaty written in English, which none of the tribal “representatives” could read or speak; it was translated for them not into their own languages but the Chinook trade jargon—a system consisting of about six hundred words and signs, none of them designed to convey an exchange of this magnitude. Bjorgen and Uebelacker conclude,

> It is quite possible that some had in mind that they were ceding or giving up only the immediate areas around their winter villages, as well as customary hunting and berrying grounds in or near the drainage in which they lived. If so . . . the government representatives likely intended a larger ceded area than did the representatives of the Tribes. (6)

When students assume that land was “given up” in exchange for promises of money and future benefits such as health care or education, I want them to understand the depth of that land’s meaning. I want them to have some knowledge of the desperation, fear, and anger that went into making such a decision or accepting
such an exchange. I want my students to at least begin to realize that when someone says “place” to an Indian, there is an immediate and visceral response in that Indian person: place means land, story, culture, history, memory. Place means relationship between self and land. Between human spirit and earth energy. Place means more than that: it means knowing there is and must be such a relationship between self and land. In order to even begin to grasp Native concepts about land and identity found in Native literatures, students need the grounded, tactile realization that it’s happening right now, beneath their feet.

A Metaphor in the Master’s House

Recently the Clackamas tribe in Oregon filed a claim for a sixteen-ton meteorite under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. The meteorite, the Clackamas explain, had been a sacred entity, embodying three sacred realms—sky, earth, and water—and, for thousands of years, Clackamas youths were sent on vigils to the meteorite to await messages from the spirit world. Other tribes in the area also made pilgrimages to the meteorite, and the rainwater that collected in the craters of the monolith was prized for its holiness and healing powers.

“Discovered” by a part-time miner in 1902 (on Clackamas land previously appropriated by an iron company), the meteorite was quickly moved from its ancient site and began a journey through the hands of various entrepreneurs. Starting out at twenty-five cents a look in the miner’s barn, the meteorite eventually sold for $20,000 and was then donated to a New York museum, where it has been ever since. In fact, the meteorite is the main attraction in the newly rebuilt Museum of Natural History planetarium in New York, a remodeling that has complicated the repatriation of the object for many reasons. Money and investment in the new building (the Rose Center for Earth and Space) as a showcase for the meteorite is, of course, one factor; however, an Associated Press article by John Jurgensen in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer points out other less tangible difficulties:

Ann Canty, a museum spokeswoman . . . made clear that it would not be easy to move the meteorite from the planetarium. . . . “Because the meteorite is so massive, parts of the facility had to essentially be built around it,” Canty said. The meteorite . . . was moved with a
large crane when [the old] building was dismantled in 1997. Two years before the new center was finished, contractors installed three structural piles—60-foot tubes driven into the ground—just to support it.

Enter the metaphor: a gigantic meteorite, the ultimate stolen Indian religious artifact, housed in a non-native, scientific, Western-oriented planetarium that has been built around the object in such a way as to require nearly complete destruction of that building in order to return the object to its Indian “owners” (whether the Clackamas tribe claims to actually “own” the object is yet another topic).

In unpacking this metaphor, students quickly see that removing the meteorite means not only removing many successive walls within the building, as well as the exterior wall; the sixteen-ton object can actually rest nowhere else but on the precise section of floor constructed to support it. This means that pulling the meteorite across other floors or resting a crane on any other flooring would also destroy those floors or require substantial and expensive subfloor support construction. The same article reported that when asked if the meteorite could be moved, Todd Schliemann, one of the architects who worked on the Rose Center, said, “We could find a way, but we would have to disassemble a large portion of the building. It’s a permanent fixture. It landed there, and there it will stay.” One has to admire the simplicity of Schliemann’s stand: the meteorite’s presence within the planetarium is a done deal; it happened, get over it.

In fact, Schliemann makes more of a point than he realizes. Removing the meteorite from this building goes beyond questions of what is “right,” “religious,” or even “possible.” The costs of moving such a huge object across-country are now further inflated by the costs of basically ripping open a new building, repairing the building, and then rebuilding the building without its former centerpiece as a draw for paying visitors. In a sense, the purpose of the building would no longer exist, and the building itself would be superfluous.

The Willamette Meteorite serves as a massive metaphor for the colonization of the land and peoples of North America. Like both land and people, the meteorite was “discovered” and immediately appropriated—engulfed, fenced, contained, claimed—for the financial benefit of the colonizer; like many native peoples, holy
relics, or places, the meteorite has a history and purpose that predates colonization but that is denied by the dominant culture. And yet, at the same time, the dominant culture has become dependent upon the meteorite’s presence to provide an economic and mythological profit. By remaining where and how the dominant culture has relocated it, the meteorite’s presence as an owned object allows the structure of the dominant culture to remain standing and operating in its capitalist economy, disconnected from the very land it rests on.

I often return to the Willamette Meteorite as an example of the intricacies of long-term colonization. Like mixed-bloods, the Native and the Colonizer are intermeshed in so many ways that black-and-white solutions—such as outright repatriation of an object or the land—are no longer easy and, sometimes, are not even the best solution. This is why the academy, placed where it is, has a responsibility to help facilitate new solutions that accept and incorporate, rather than deny, history. This is also why my presence on campus is all too often a thorn in the side of academic tradition.

Teaching on stolen land affects everything about my relationships with students, colleagues, administrators, and other staff. It often sets me apart and reveals a distinct rupture between my position as a professor, a member of “those with power,” and my position as an Indian woman, a member of “the conquered.” When we discuss the weather, local hikes, plants, place names, historical events, literacy, literature, feminism, theory, vegetarianism, animal rights, *Moby-Dick*, or *The Bean Trees*, my position as an indigenous person pervades my perspective. When students mention the beautiful mountain visible from my campus, they call it “Mount Rainier.” I inform them that the local Salishan Indian word is “Tahoma.” When colleagues mention a hike out at gorgeous Pt. Defiance over the weekend, I think of the Puyallup tribe, who lost that beautiful land in the fraudulent Medicine Creek Treaty. When my students talk about going to Lakewood to shop or see a movie, I know from local Indians that the flat, prairielike land used to be a natural gathering place for potlatches, celebrations, and trade—before “contact.” I argue with environmentalists about sacred land use, tangle with vegetarians over animal rights, caution religion professors about “experiencing” Native culture at a weekend “sweat lodge.” All around me as I walk through the academy, place speaks in ways that non-Native ears can’t hear or often don’t want to hear. For me, and for other Indian academics, teaching in a university is
about more than educating, more than self-representation, more than Equal Opportunity. Every day, we go about the work of repatriation. We take back our land and our right to that land—and by this I mean both literally and spiritually—from within the very institutions that taught generations the art of theft, of erasure, and crafted the mythology of America. We do this in many, many ways but, most importantly, with our bodies. Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene), speaking in an interview with the Honolulu Star Bulletin reporter Cynthia Oi, said of a non-native writer, “When you finish writing about Indians, you get up from your typewriter and you’re still white. When I finish, I have to go out and buy groceries, as an Indian.” I consider simply showing up at the university every day in my Indian body to be a large portion of this repatriation effort. After all, it wasn’t easy getting my indigenous body into the academy in the first place.

Reality Check 102

Native Americans currently make up less than two percent of the total population in the United States, yet we have the highest rates of suicide, poverty, illiteracy, and incarceration in prisons of any ethnic or cultural group in the U.S., including all other “minorities.” So if Natives are eligible for a “free ride” through the university system and if a college degree guarantees some kind of financial security, what’s the problem?

First, I ask my students if what they’ve learned so far about Indians and the U.S. government honestly supports the idea that a “free ride” through college for every single Indian person is somehow a guarantee. As Devon Mihesuah explains in American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities, this is simply a myth that is perpetuated by misinformed and perhaps racist rhetoric. Secondly, my students find the publication American Indians and Alaska Natives in Post-secondary Education from the U.S. government to be very handy. Available online, you can also receive a free copy of it, in bound form, simply by filling out a request form at their website. Among the conclusions the U.S. Department of Education has drawn for 1994 (the most recent survey) are these:

Total number of PhDs earned in the U.S. by U.S. Citizens: 27,105

American Indian/Alaska Native degree recipients for PhDs: 134—less than .5 percent of all PhDs
Total number of MAs earned in the U.S. by U.S. Citizens: 385,419
AI/AN degree recipients for MAs: 1,697—about .4 percent of all MAs
Total number of BAs earned in the U.S. by U.S. Citizens: 1,165,973
AI/AN degree recipients for BAs: 6,189—slightly more than .5 percent of all BAs

As you may suppose from the low numbers of Native PhDs, Native faculty at U.S. institutions of higher learning are also rare: in the Fall of 1993, in four-year universities, there were 1,218 Native professors with tenure, 474 on tenure track, and 371 adjuncts teaching part-time or full-time on year-to-year contracts. In addition, the report notes that since an earlier study in 1975, tenure-track Native professors had fallen by 10 percent in 1993, while nontenured (adjunct, visiting, guest positions) Native PhDs increased. Long-term employment possibilities (read health benefits, tuition breaks for children, job security, career advancement) for Native PhD scholars actually fell during the height of Affirmative Action policy! (Note to self: remember to ask the next student who complains about Indians getting a free ride through college, “And how many Native teachers/professors/doctors/lawyers have you had in your lifetime? How many do you see at this institution?”)

Buffalo Poop, Buffalo Poop! Buffalo Poop
All Over This Land!

I wish I had written that, but I didn’t; I found it on a bumper sticker at a Native business selling bison meat. I loved that bumper sticker at first sight; it speaks volumes to me of invasion, colonization, survival, fertility, indigenous resistance, and the deep, abiding relationship with homeland that resonates within Indian people even five hundred years after the invasion. To me, this bumper sticker is a pungent reminder to both Native and non-native that everything under our feet is part of a rich, purposeful cycle; that everywhere we step, we walk on indigenous soil, land springing up out of a revered animal’s excrement. Holy shit, indeed. This bumper sticker exhorts us to acknowledge and celebrate that older and honest history; it’s about knowing and seeing, accepting and reveling in origins. I teach on stolen land; my students learn
on stolen land. What is there for us to know from this, beyond statistics and thought experiments designed to teach or at least introduce compassion?

Excerpt from an Indigenous Teaching Journal

Indians in the academy perform daily acts of repatriation and healing. Our presence in this place, in these places, on these lands constitutes a ceremony for recovery. When Gloria Anzaldúa writes in a poem from her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, “This land was Mexican once, / was Indian always, / and is. / And will be again,” the hairs on the back of my neck stand up (3). Yet the population and culture of the North American continent have been changed forever, and few Indians imagine a time when all the white people get back in their boats and “go home.” This is, truly, the heart of the repatriation work ahead of us: How do I teach American Literature in the academy in ways that don’t drive me insane, that don’t perpetuate a mythology of conquest and Manifest Destiny, and that allow the land upon which I teach to speak through me? How do I teach what I know? Can I teach what I know?

As if she knew I would ask these questions one day, Linda Hogan, Chickasaw poet and novelist, writes,

> [I]t is not so easy. There are no roads through, no paths known, no maps or directions. . . . Who knows where to step, how to find wholeness? It’s not that we have lost the old ways and intelligences, but that we are lost from them. . . . [A]ll the elements of ourselves and our world are more than can be held in words alone; there is something else beyond our knowing. (14–16)

It is important that I understand Linda Hogan’s caution that some kinds of knowledge, some forms of information or direction cannot be captured in words or taught using words—even, if we are blessed enough to still speak them, the most sacred words of our native language. There is a knowing that cannot be held in words alone.

So, I have to ask myself, are there some things we can’t teach? Or, to put it another way: are there things we can’t learn? There are times when it feels like that—not only with “normal” topics like math or composition, but also with keenly felt abstracts like racism, oppression, justice. As a female, queer writer of color, as
an Indian academic, I want to argue that intangibles (or as Hogan calls them, *intelligences*) are in fact inherent in all of us, perhaps just deeply hidden or needing the right language to bring out. Literature—poetry, fiction, narrative nonfiction, personal essay, mixed-genre, and bent boundaries—is that language for me. Maybe melody can't be “carried” or “conveyed” from one being to another—just scooped up like a sack of flour and given to someone else—because that knowing is, somehow, already within. Hogan also says that “[the old ways] are always here, patient, waiting for our return to their beauty, their integrity, their reverence for life” (14–15). What if these knowledges, _always here_, can be _evoked_ from one being to another—in a moment of resonance?

When tuning a drum, you lean down with your face right over the drumhead and hum the note you want the drum to hold, while adjusting the sinews on the back or bottom or sides of the drum (depending on construction) that tighten or loosen the drumhead accordingly. I learned this not as a young Indian girl in traditional training, but as a junior high student who bucked her counselor’s advice to take typing or accounting and followed, instead, a powerful yearning toward tympani and snare (where tradition is lacking, perhaps the body remembers). I have since discovered that it’s the same for any drum, though, whether symphonic or native, machine- or handmade. Tuning a drum is a whole-body effort—foot, leg, diaphragm, lungs, breath, lips, hands—because you must stand with your feet firmly planted, knees bent a little to keep the body’s energy open, humming and simultaneously tapping the drumhead with a stick or finger. And as you hum out into the drum, tap the drumhead, and pull or release the drumhead ever so slightly, the drum searches for the note. And when everything coalesces—the pressure of the drumhead, the humming in your mouth, the angle and punctuation of a strike—the drum sings the note back to you. Then your whole body, starting with your head (and teeth!), continuing down to the very soles of your feet, is enveloped in the totality of _rightness_; the note sings its way back up your spine and out through your molars and connects with the drum’s note. Then, it’s complete. Then, you _know_.

Writing, the art of literature, is like tuning a drum: a whole-body experience. I can’t leave my body behind when I read and write; not the flesh-and-blood body I really have, nor that body’s “Indian” identity that my audience and I have been culturally trained to see and respond to. So I work with what I bring. When I write about
being a child of color in a white world, when I write about sexual abuse, the intergenerational violence that a Native American father passes on to his children, or what it’s like to fall madly in love with another Indian woman, I can’t simply insert information and understanding into my reader’s minds. As a teacher, I can’t open my student’s minds and drop in a magic computer chip that will explain the intricacies of Native literatures. But I can, I hope, evoke a resonance within them: through a multisensory, multimedia approach that includes Native poetry, literature, song, film, live readings, storytelling, visual/performance art, and, of course, awareness of place and local tribal connections to that place. These are my tools, with which I “invite” (rather than “strike,” a distinction I make thanks to Thich Nhat Hanh’s caution about sounding a meditation bell) the heartdrum of students and with which I keep searching for the note that will resound for each one, offering the practice of a whole-body discipline that will, one day, allow what it is that I know—and more, maybe, that I don’t know—to find a pathway from my heart to the heart of a student. I’m not really passing on what I know, of course; I am passing on a key to a door, a window, a glimpse of something beyond what they’ve known. Maybe it’s compassion, tenderness, or a larger way of seeing our complexities as human animals. I know that other writers, artists, and musicians do this for me, even when I am at my angriest and most resistant.

Fine-Tuning the Mind: Teaching Resonance

Immersion in Native arts is not the only way to open those hearts, however. Re-teaching American and European literatures is also a tool for repatriation. I’ve often thought that the captivity narratives of early contact (in which whites were taken captive by Indians, enduring all sorts of humiliations, traumas, and “savagery”) have continued into contemporary American literature, with a twist: the Indian is taken captive by the white man via plot, symbol, and construction. So when I teach *Moby-Dick*, for example, we spend quite a bit of time on passages like the following, in which Melville examines the indigenous Queequeg’s body, especially his tattoos.

> And this tattooing had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out of his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical
Placing the Academy

treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg
in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a won-
drous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not
even himself could read, though his own live heart beat
against them; and these mysteries were therefore des-
tined in the end to moulder away with the living parch-
ment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved
to the last. (455)

Much as Europeans judged the North American continent “un-
used” by its indigenous inhabitants, then, Queequeg’s resources
(“intelligences”) are wasted on him; he cannot read the markings
or the maps his own body carries. Queequeg’s skin also bears his
“mark”—∞—the symbol for infinity. It is, in fact, the only mark he
knows how to make and signifies his name on his whaling contract.
Infinity is literally written on Queequeg’s skin. Poor guy! He’s a
walking indigenous institution of learning; thus, his body becomes
the site of a great conflict: the battle for North America. Queequeg
is, as Ishmael says, “a wondrous work in one volume,” and if Ish-
mael can possess that knowledge, he has the essential qualifica-
tions for possessing the land. We can, as others have, call this a
homoerotic text, but to give the passage only that reading avoids
the American concept of Manifest Destiny—with which Melville’s
culture and psyche (and our own contemporary identities) are im-
bued. Instead, I ask my students to read the text hidden within the
text: those wonderfully symbolic tattoos. It is not simply a question
of possession, but of how, why, and with what intent Ishmael pos-
sesses indigenous knowledge.

When the Pequod sinks with everyone aboard but Ishmael, Ish-
mael survives by clinging to Queequeg’s empty coffin, the same
container to which Queequeg had spent days “transferring” all
of his tantalizing tattoos by carving each design into the wood.
Queequeg’s “skin” saves Ishmael from drowning in a wilderness
of waves. This coffin-turned-lifeboat sets Ishmael upon dry land,
reborn in the skin of the “new” Native American. To the end, Que-
equeg continues to serve, his skin a container and receptacle for
Ishmael’s new life. Queequeg has been taken captive; he has been
invaded, colonized, and appropriated from the inside out. Like
the Willamette Meteorite, like the North American continent, all
spiritual and culture meaning has been stripped from Queequeg’s
“resources”; all that remains is the utilitarian shell.
Meanwhile, Back at the Meteorite

Why is it important for my students to be able to read *Moby-Dick* and other American texts through an indigenous lens? Does it mean I hate Melville? Does it mean early European-American literature is racist? Back to the Meteorite! Albert Memmi asserts that the process of genocide is not purely a physical one; genocide depends upon, in fact, the appropriation of the identity of the colonized by the colonizer. Misinterpretations and misrepresentations of Native culture, religion, character, and worldview for consumption by the nonindigenous are the crucial elements in such a genocidal agenda. What Memmi emphasizes is not the repression of the indigenous cultures involved, but the repackaging of those cultures as a way to “capture” the indigenous into the dominant culture and keep it there, separate and contained. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, speaking of works by Wallace Stegner, which “terminate” the American Indian presence on the North American continent via literary moves very similar to the ones I’ve explored here, puts Memmi’s thoughts into a Native American context this way:

> [The Stegner phenomenon of [white] exclusivity in literature and history . . . takes over, colonizes, invades the reality of human experience in North America to the extent that the concepts of indigenousness and aboriginality are quite misdefined and ultimately misunderstood by the reading public. When that happens, the American Indian’s literary, historical, and cultural presence in America is repeatedly falsified or denied. (38)]

Cook-Lynn acknowledges that “the business of claiming indigenousness and inventing supportive mythology is an activity of the human imagination,” one that both Native Americans and the colonizer can legitimately engage in as part of the storytelling process. The problem, however, is that because of the oppression of voice experienced by Indians and the tremendous privilege of voice experienced by white Americans, there is little opportunity to challenge this repackaging. What should be a dialogue between peoples is too often a false history that “forever excludes Indians from participation in the community of contemporary human thought” (37). The negation of place is closely linked to the negation of indigenous bodies, knowledge, and human rights; if you can deny or distort ideas about Indian bodies or culture, you make it much easier to
rationalize or justify the theft of land from a population deemed savage, incompetent, or vanished.

We are back to the idea of those “free” Indian educations again, aren’t we? Literacy entered this continent as a weapon against Native peoples, attacking the core of Native existence through treaties and erasure of Native languages: the connection and claim to Homeland. Thus when, as in the Meteorite metaphor earlier, it seems that the American House is constructed and dependent on the appropriation of Indian spirituality and land, Indian resistance in the form of repatriative texts and Native readings of American Literature cannot be judged simply as complaining, politically correct theory or as a scholarly refutation that deserves equal time. Indigenous “criticism” of misrepresentations of Indians by non-Indians is nothing less than self-defense, as Indians resist being taken captive and made into a collection for study—like the Willamette Meteorite, like Queequeg’s very body—and having American history and mythology built around our captive identities.

Audre Lorde wrote, “The Master’s tools will never tear down the Master’s house” (112). But perhaps Lorde did not realize that in the case of American Indians, it is not tools filched by the natives that the Master should be concerned with, but rather what the Master has stolen that is captive in his own house. The native-constructed metaphor is resistance incarnate, plotting repatriation from within the Master’s own walls. This Indian is thinking, You steal the land, build a country on a stolen foundation, construct a cage around it. All that you have—your possessions, your ethics, your history—depends on keeping this land captive. Your cage must grow still more complex: you must construct more restraints. Literature that serves as steel bars, schools that serve as locks, textbooks that are prison guards. What keys are available to us to dismantle this perpetually tightening confinement?

The Location of “Indian”

Most Native American literature teachers, both Native and non-native, will tell you that they also teach U.S. history, law, anthropology, psychology, spiritual belief systems, indigenous ideas about gender, and even medical information (such as early forms of germ warfare) in order to cover texts like, say, Mean Spirit by Linda Hogan, Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko, or poetry by Luci Tapahonso, Joy Harjo, or Chrystos. But there’s something else Native professors have to do: teach our lives, our bodies, as texts
and documents and evidence of a crime. Our bodies become the site, the place, of conflict in ways that no white professor can ever know. This can be disturbing and invasive, as well as exhilarating, empowering, and freeing.

For me—Indian, woman, professor, United Statesian—teaching in the academy is one of the most complicated acts of my life. It is complicated because of who I am, where the university is located, the history of that location with my ancestors’ lives, and, by virtue of that history, my own daily life. I have had my ethnic identity challenged by students and faculty. I have had my motives challenged. I have been accused of “reverse racism.” My authority and my credentials have been questioned by students who insist I do not have the ability to properly instruct or grade them. I have been told that I present an unbalanced and untruthful agenda. The lack of respect accorded to me by students (and sometimes faculty and staff) is hard for my white colleagues to understand. Many days, I think of Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna/Sioux) telling me in conversation about her abortive attempt to tell an allegorical story of being held hostage in one’s own backyard. She couldn’t write it, she says; it was too heartbreaking.

Allen’s words highlight my fear of who I’ll turn into, living within this context of struggle. Will I become hard, competitive, mean-spirited, defensive? Beaten, cowed, ashamed? A professor known for her anger, her intrusive ethnicity, her insistence on complicating? Will my mostly white colleagues regard me with suspicion, pity, “tolerance,” ridicule? Can I continue following my heart as a poet? Will my poetry have any guts, any tenderness? Will frustration destroy all that’s good in me? Will my grief and anger leave me wordless, useless?

So far in this essay about Indians, place, and the academy, I’ve written about theft, murder, miseducation, racism, intolerance, fear, and the small daily violences of teaching in a university. If I sound angry to some readers, let me reassure you that your impression is correct. If you are asking, where’s the lyric beauty in this essay? Where are the fragrant wild meadows at dawn, the deer pausing at the foot of a mountain, the sign of bear on a tree trunk? Where is the red clay, the healing spring bubbling up, the holy burial grounds of ancestors? Where is the Indianness in this essay?—look closer. It’s all here. Because I cannot separate my identity from the land, this is how my relationship to place and the academy plays out. Every day. Every hour. Every lecture. Every time I step foot on a university
campus, all that beauty—and all that violence—is there, and I am the mouth that testifies. This essay, like the invitation of a drumstick to a drumhead, asks you to listen. In her powerful essay, “The Uses of Anger,” Audre Lorde writes that “anger is full of information and energy” (127), stressing that the crucial difference between anger and hatred is the intended outcome: anger seeks to communicate, while hatred wants only to destroy. I’ve tried to use my anger wisely, but it is anger nonetheless, and I do not apologize for it. I am more Indian in the academy than anywhere else in the world. Indianness is accentuated for Indian academics because we teach within our homeland, yet in enemy territory. Repatriation is at the core of our teaching, our hours of advising, the classes we guest teach for colleagues, the papers we grade, our articles, our poetry, our presence. It’s in our love poetry. It’s in our anger. But it’s not just revenge, taking back, in order to own. It’s a reclamation of the right to engage in a creative, thinking, compassionate, sustainable world. When I communicate my anger about injustice to my students, they are often angry in turn—at me, for waking them up, at their American educations for keeping them uninformed or misinformed, at themselves for never questioning the history or stereotypes they’d been fed. The question I hear most often, “Why didn’t anyone ever tell us about this?” asked with anguish and real regret. Then, right on the heels of that question, comes the cry, “What else do I not know?” Then I know that my students have transformed themselves into critical thinkers and have begun the long journey towards reestablishing their own relationship with place and with justice. Suddenly, they locate themselves on the planet, and they have questions.

What’s it like to be the hostage, held captive in your own backyard? What’s it like to be the sacred relic encased in a museum cage? What’s it like to be hollowed out, a shell of your sacred self, a divine text used and discarded? Chrystos, Menominee poet and artist, responds to this kind of indigenous trauma in her poem, “Leaf behind My Ear.” When a woman asks her, How do you have hope to go on? the poet replies,

I can’t answer that question I’ve carried with me
except to say I’m alive I’m loved
there’s work to do (128)

This work of repatriation in the academy is not about victimization or blame games. It’s about the acknowledgment and resolution
of real and tangible crimes so that a future truly is worth living. That’s what I want to tell you. The people and the land are one. As long as the land is held captive by lies and ignorant “owners,” so am I. So are we all. Take a deep breath. Smell that fragrant, fierce, fertile buffalo poop beneath your feet. Let it teach you your place in this world.

Notes

1. I taught at Pacific Lutheran University in Washington state immediately preceding the writing of this essay and now teach on Monacan land at Washington and Lee University in Virginia—where many of the same issues about land and heritage must be negotiated, especially in a state where not one of the eight Indian tribes still existing have “received” Federal Recognition.
2. Like many American Indians, I grew up using the word “Indian” to self-identify; this term is widely used among tribes in the United States (as a quick look at Native literatures will reveal). “Native American” is a term recently invented for use in the academy but is misleading since it can also be used to refer to any person born in North or South America. “Indigenous” and “Native,” “First Nations,” or “First Peoples” are common terms as well, often used interchangeably by American Indians. In this essay, I use many of these terms for rhetorical variety, but especially “Indian,” as it is used most often by my American Indian peers and colleagues.
3. Excellent, concrete descriptions of the miseducation Americans receive about American Indians may be found in James Loewen’s Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong (specifically, United States public school systems); Robert F. Berkhofer’s The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present (specifically, American culture); and The American Indian Quarterly Special Issue “Native Experiences in the Ivory Tower” (edited by Devon Mihesuah). Mihesuah’s So You Want to Write about American Indians? A Guide for Writers, Students, and Scholars is a helpful beginning text for those wishing to take corrective measures regarding such miseducation.
4. In 2000, the Museum and the Confederated Tribes of the Grande Ronde Community of Oregon signed a historic agreement that “ensures access to the Willamette Meteorite at the museum for religious, historical, and cultural uses while maintaining its continued presence at the museum for scientific and educational purposes” (“Tribe,” Sheridan [OR] Sun).
Bibliography

Allen, Paula Gunn. Telephone interview. 8 December 1998.


