In Harjo’s poem, “the dazzling whirlwind of our anger” is associated with the Ghost Dance, the phenomenon of the late 1800s that was interpreted by whites as a call for war and yet was at once a more drastic and a more peaceful protest than they could have ever imagined. The Ghost Dance is an apt illustration of the ways that American Indians’ anger has been misinterpreted, forced into a narrative other than their own. The adoption of the Ghost Dance among the Lakotas was followed by the deaths of nearly 300 men, women, and children from Big Foot’s band of Miniconjou Sioux at Wounded Knee Creek in December 1893.¹

Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa), a Santee Dakota doctor who treated some of the survivors, speaks of the “so-called hostile” camp (63) and the “friendlies” (55), two words that epitomize the racialization of anger in the nineteenth century. As the words indicate, Native Americans were defined (and in some cases, defined themselves) by certain emotional responses, which in turn were thought to determine their relationship to whites. With these quotation marks, Eastman attempts to distance himself from these terms. His simultaneous use of and separation from

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Conclusion

AN ANGER OF THEIR OWN

As I understand ten years later after the slow changing of the seasons that we have just begun to touch the dazzling whirlwind of our anger, we have just begun to perceive the amazed world the ghost dancers entered crazily, beautifully.

—Joy Harjo, “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash . . .” (34–40)
these words indicate his complicated relationship to Native American communities and non-Native discourses about them. In an attempt to lay claim to an Indianness that exists outside of the simplistic terms “hostile” or “friendly,” Eastman emphasizes an “Indian etiquette” that is measured and peaceful and yet acknowledges the travesty of the massacre (57). As a Santee Dakota man who had been educated among whites, he searched for the words to interpret a ceremony and the Wounded Knee massacre that in many ways defied expression. A century later, Joy Harjo invokes a literary Ghost Dance in which Native Americans once again articulate an anger of their own. Drawing from a shared memory of—and outrage for—Native Americans, Harjo presents a collective, “an amazed world,” a nation of their own.

To this point, I have concentrated on anger and sentimentality in early American Indian women’s texts, arguing that while Alice Callahan, Pauline Johnson, and Sarah Winnemucca each employ a sentimentality in which sarcasm and irony mark anger, Winnemucca is most successful at using it to affirm her indigenous nationhood. Their success is related to the genres they employ: Callahan is hindered by the script of the Indian reformer, for example, while Johnson’s short stories are marked by a tension between a cross-racial romance and a Native woman’s loyalty to her nation. Winnemucca, in the form of a self-narrative, is most able to command language for her (and her nation’s) own ends, ultimately showing the distinction between her own words and those of whites. When we juxtapose these authors and their works, other things become clear: for one, the phenomenon of playing angry, which in *Wynema* is limited to the white reformer, is more available to Johnson and Winnemucca. For them, however, it is not without its costs: Johnson is sexualized on stage and Winnemucca’s response to attacks on her virtue are described as “an overdose of ‘mad,’” a phrase that indicates how anger was used to stereotype American Indian women.2

All three women, whether during their lives or after, have been charged with disloyalty to their indigenous nations. Such charges are perhaps inevitable for the first published writers of any group, especially those who wrote in English and worked closely with whites. As I have shown, Winnemucca is most able—at least within the pages of her narrative—to confront this criticism head on. Conversations with Northern Paiutes at Pyramid Lake today indicate that anger about her disloyalty remains, a likely response to the enduring power of *Life Among the Paiutes*. It is the book, after all, that prompts white women like Georgia Hedrick to embark on a campaign to memorialize Sarah Winnemucca.
Conclusion

As I have demonstrated, sentimentality has its costs: each author, at various times, positions Native Americans as objects in need of white protection. For all of its cultural authority, even Winnemucca’s narrative defers at times to the white “expert,” as Mann’s footnotes illustrate. Johnson is perhaps least willing to cede this authority, presenting her own footnotes—for example, the declarative “Fact” in “A Red Girl’s Reasoning”—to underscore her heroine’s statements. Her essay “A Strong Race Opinion” is one of the most emphatic statements of cultural authority that I examine. Here Johnson critiques those authors who write “Indian literature” with no real experience with indigenous peoples. In this sense, her essay seems a prescient forerunner to contemporary calls for acknowledging American Indian literary nationalism.

Given that anger is inevitably raced and gendered, these texts are explorations of not only Native nationalism but masculinity and femininity as well. Gender roles are particularly differentiated in Callahan’s novel, presenting an interesting contrast to Gail Bederman’s claim that in the late nineteenth century people of color were represented as lacking the rigid gender distinctions of whites. Perhaps in response to such stereotypes, Callahan imagines male and female Creeks who embody conventional (white) masculinity and femininity. Yet this ultra-femininity, marked by deference and selflessness, offers Wynema none of the anger that drives Genevieve’s self-development. It is only the white woman who can access, at least briefly, a healthy assertion. One of the tragedies of the story Callahan tells, then, is that there was little room, at least in her imagination, for a three-dimensional indigenous woman. Chikena, the one Native woman who raises a forceful protest, is described in both masculine and feminine terms. To imagine an angry Native woman, it seems, Callahan must look outside the Creek community to the Lakotas. While the heroines of Pauline Johnson’s “As It Was in the Beginning” and “A Red Girl’s Reasoning” witness the demise of their cross-racial, heterosexual relationships by the end of each story, Wynema’s survives and indeed culminates in the requisite bliss of marriage and motherhood. The difference is that while the Native woman of Johnson’s stories makes certain claims—first to Laurence and second to her indigenous wedding rites—Wynema is claimed by her white lover. Her emotional expression is limited to a passive response to his desire rather than an insistence of her own. In this sense, she does not lay claim to her rights, a central aspect of empowering anger as I have described it.

It is this deferent, selfless Indian woman that Johnson blasts in her essay “A Strong Race Opinion,” indicating her desire to create indigenous
An Anger of Their Own

heroines who would refuse mistreatment. Throughout her poetry and fiction are women who raise voices of protest: the chief’s daughter slams the English for their oppressive tactics, Christie leaves her white husband when he refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of her parents’ indigenous marriage, and Esther kills the white man who chooses a white woman in her place. Notably, in this last instance, Esther locates the anger that rouses her to murder in her gender rather than her race. This effort epitomizes the attempts of all three writers to articulate a justified anger that would be taken seriously. It is this struggle that Harjo describes in the lines “we have just begun to touch / the dazzling whirlwind of our anger” (36–37).

The writer’s ability to articulate an indigenous anger, these texts suggest, is correlated with her tribalism. As Craig Womack has demonstrated, the Indians Callahan describes bear little relation to actual Creeks; they live in “tepees,” they do not engage in historic resistance efforts, and no Creek language appears in the novel. In contrast, Johnson’s essays specify Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) traditions such as the hanging of the Maternity Mask (“Heroic Indian Mothers” 23) and the clan matron’s nomination of tribal leaders. Winnemucca devotes an entire chapter to the ethnography of the Paiutes, in which she makes statements such as “we have a republic as well as you” (53). In moments like this Winnemucca writes herself into a tribalist position—an “explication of specific Native values, readings, and knowledges” (Weaver, Womack, and Warrior 6)—from which she can critique non-Paiutes. That is, her tribalism offers her a speaking authority: a place from which she can judge others. As Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, and Robert Warrior note in American Indian Literary Nationalism, “At its most profound, literary nationalism is not a confrontation, not a tearing down, but an upbuilding” (6) While these critics suggest writers like Sarah Winnemucca and Zitkala-Ša too easily satisfy a non-Native desire for a Pocahontas or Squanto-like surrender to colonialism, I would argue that these authors make important contributions to tribalist discourse (2). Certainly, they are not the only writers who do so—the field of Native American literary studies benefits from attention to a broad range of voices—but it seems dismissive to cast these writers off as products of colonialism.

I end my analysis in the twentieth century, where discussions of Native American resistance usually begin. One bridge between these early texts
and Harjo’s poem is the Native-centered organizations like the Society of American Indians (SAI) and the National Council of American Indians (NCAI) that were established early in the 1900s. While the overall success of organizations like the SAI is debatable, they offered people like Zitkala-Ša and Arthur Parker opportunities for resistance and critique (8). One such opportunity came in the form of the *American Indian Magazine* (originally known as the *Quarterly Journal*), the main organ of the SAI.

The contributions of Zitkala-Ša, secretary of the SAI and later founder of the NCAI, are an especially useful link between the anger of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. As her essay “What It Means to be an Indian Today” concludes, “To be an Indian today means to be an inarticulate subject under the plenary power of Congress, presumed by the United States Supreme Court to be governed by Christian motives in its dealings with this ignorant and dependent race. It means to be hungry, sick, and dying while still used for a national political football” (46–47). Combining a sentimental image of Native persecution with a sarcastic edge, Zitkala-Ša’s words resemble Callahan’s biting account of the public’s reaction to the slaughter of American Indians, the daughter’s response to her father’s murder in Johnson’s poem “The Cattle Thief,” and Winnemucca’s clever critique of words like “civilization” and “savagery.” Similarly, Zitkala-Ša’s poem “The Indian’s Awakening” creates a stark image of the boarding school that contrasts Colonel Pratt’s ominous call for the Indian to “save his life only by losing it by quitting all race distinctions and climbing into the great big all containing band wagon of real American citizenship through industrial usefulness.”

In Zitkala-Ša’s hands, Pratt’s school is unsuccessful in two terms. It deprives students of their cultural heritage and fails even according to his standards: the work is not complete. The rest of the poem is stocked with the imagery of failure: “My light has grown dim, and black the abyss / That yawns at my feet. No bordering shore; / No bottom e’er found by hopes sunk before” (9–11). As she continues, “I’ve lost my long hair; my eagle plumes too. / From you my own people, I’ve gone astray. / A wanderer now, with no where to stay” (17–19). The individuality that Pratt would herald
as a sign of progress is here a mark of decline: “I stand isolated, life gone amiss” (24). This failure has two facets: it is both the individual isolation that sentimentality decries and the divide from the community that scholars like Jace Weaver and Arnold Krupat have shown is so undesirable in Native American literature. Zitkala-Ša’s line recalls Winnemucca’s effort in Life Among the Piutes to restore her position within her tribal community; as she realizes, to “stand isolated” is to lack authority.

In a scene of American Indian Stories, her semi-autobiographical account of boarding school education, Zitkala-Ša forges this critique in domestic terms. Reprimanded for some trivial “misdemeanor,” the young narrator is forced to mash turnips for the evening dinner. The turnips instantly become the target of her anger. “I hated turnips, and their odor which came from the brown jar was offensive to me” (60). In a vivid description of the relationship between her body and the turnip jar, she describes taking the wooden tool, climbing up on the stool, and grasping the handle firmly with both hands.

I bent in hot rage over the turnips. I worked my vengeance upon them . . .
I saw that the turnips were in a pulp, and that further beating could not improve them; but the order was, “Mash these turnips,” and mash them I would! I renewed my energy, and as I sent the masher into the bottom of the jar, I felt a satisfying sensation that the weight of my body had gone into it. (60)

Standing “fearless and angry,” she recalls, “I whooped in my heart for having once asserted the rebellion within me” (61). Her unjustified punishment ironically becomes the vehicle for her revenge. Not insignificantly, it is in the kitchen—the ultimate domestic space—that this is carried out. Quite unlike the docile, obedient girl who is supposed to quietly mash the turnips, she takes this order to the extreme, challenging the stereotypes to which she is expected to conform. She has devoted her whole body to the task, but for a very different end. From a conventional domestic stage, she uses irony to enact her anger. According to Laura Wexler, this scene, as well as the moment when she cries to no avail, illustrates the narrative’s anti-sentimentality: the tears that would otherwise be effective here go unheard. But I would argue that through this invocation of the reader’s sympathy and outrage about her treatment—in this case her inability to be heard through tears—the genre’s emphasis on the power of tears remains intact. To say that her “self-conception had been so effectively ensnared within the codes of sentiment that there was no Indian in them that
was left untouched by Western codes” (Wexler 32–33) is to neglect the
ability of this indigenous author to represent her experience in powerful,
and sentimental, terms.

Zitkala-Ša was not the only early-twentieth-century Native American
activist to employ sentimentality in the *American Indian Magazine*; Seneca
writer Arthur Parker (Gawasa Wanneh) uses the familiar image of per-
secuted innocence to articulate anger about the representations of Native
Americans in school textbooks:

Our school books do not tell how Indian women and children were shot
without mercy and how Indians praying to the white man's Christ, on
their very knees, were shot to death by white men. History that we study
in school says nothing of how Indians were scalped, skinned alive, burned
and otherwise tortured by white men or how babies' bodies were brought
in for bounty rewards. But all these facts with thousands of instances of
heathenish, fiendish savagery committed by white men are on record in
documents and books of undisputed authenticity. Why did the heathen
rage? Ask the God of nations. (25)

Like Sarah Winnemucca, Parker finds a venue for turning the terms of “sav-
agery” and “civility” on their heads: “heathen rage” is transferred to whites,
leaving American Indians with a more justified anger. Sentimentalism and
anger converge in the image of mutilated babies, an image to haunt whites
and Natives alike. The writer applies the language of savagery to whites in
a style not unlike that of earlier Native American activists such as William
Apess, who also used the language of Christianity and sentimentality to
rewrite American history from an indigenous perspective.

The *American Indian Magazine*’s editorial offered another venue for
Native American writers to lay claim to their rightful possessions, a key
characteristic of anger as I have described it. In his essay “Certain Important
Elements of the Indian Problem,” for instance, Parker detailed the list
of things that “Americans” had taken from Native peoples. No progress
would be made, he argued, until whites acknowledged their appropria-
tion of property, from land to intellectual rights. An editorial from the
April–June 1914 issue reclaims the right of Native Americans to represent
themselves: “The show Indian is not the real Indian any more than the
circus white man is the real white man” (175). The “Editorial Comment”
from the October–December issue of 1914 declares in no uncertain terms,
“American Indian blood is in America to stay” (262). A January–March
1916 editorial imagines the magazine as a voice for resistance: “No, the
modern Indian cannot live on the bitter pottage of history and eat his heart out thinking how the white man cheated his ancestors. It is for him to pluck the feathers from his war bonnet and make fountain pens of them” (9–10). Here the images used against Native Americans—the supposedly savage feathers of the war bonnet—become potent weapons as writing instruments. This quotation offers a useful distinction between affect and action. Weeping about persecution is not enough; Native Americans must turn their rage into powerful words.

Such rage is also evident in the narrations of the later American Indian Movement. In their account of the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in 1972, Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior describe how each key of a typewriter was carefully twisted beyond repair in an instance of “slow, consuming anger” (167). Here a literal tool of the colonizers’ language is literally and symbolically reclaimed by those who have been the subject of documentation and control. An essay from 1964 declares that “to connect young Indian anger to people in local communities was necessary for real social change to occur” (quoted in Smith and Warrior 53). Vine Deloria, Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle claim that the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 is “symbolic of the conflict that is raging in Indian hearts everywhere” (Nations Within 12). Anger is also a central aspect of pantribalism, linking multiple nations in response to U.S. policies like boarding schools and termination. Alcatraz occupation leader Stella Leach should be understood, Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior claim, in terms of “the anger and resentment fostered during her childhood years in a terrible BIA boarding school”—an anger and resentment that can be multiplied a thousandfold (71). Other protests were products of “pent-up rage—especially among impoverished, underserved Indians in the cities” (Smith and Warrior 93). Whether it is used against American Indians or in their defense, anger remains an important part of this narrative.

In response to such Native narrations of anger, whites produced representations not unlike the phrenology of the 1800s. In his study of NBC coverage of the American Indian Movement protests from 1968 to 1979, for example, Tim Baylor notes, “Social control agents and polity leaders specifically tried to create factionalism to create dissension within AIM’s ranks. They understood this would decrease AIM’s ability to mount a successful challenge” (248). In other words, representations of internal anger in American Indian resistance movements were used to undermine Native solidarity. Non-Natives imagined an anger not far removed from nineteenth-century stereotypes of “savagery” and “destructiveness,”
“hostiles” and “friendlies.” A marshal outside of the Wounded Knee occupation of 1973 told reporters, “They’re still roamin’ out there, the Injuns. They’d love to get a whitey” (quoted in Smith and Warrior 207). Baylor’s study found that “militant” was the frame used in 90 percent of the news segments, even before AIM’s major protests had occurred. That is, the movement was described in terms of violence and a lack of law and order—anger out of control—rather than treaty rights, self-defense, or civil disobedience. Charles W. Mills’s account of “the racial contract” offers one explanation of this response to AIM: “watchfulness for nonwhite resistance and a corresponding readiness to employ massively disproportionate retaliatory violence are intrinsic to the fabric of the racial polity in a way different from the response to the typical crimes of white citizens” (86). The moral order that the racial contract depends on is one in which whites/persons are distinguished from nonwhites/nonpersons through violence and ideological manipulation. Any challenge to this arrangement, like Custer’s defeat or the occupation of Wounded Knee, incites what Mills calls an “ontological shudder”: the terror that “order” must be restored (86). In this sense, anger is read as savagery that fundamentally challenges the assumptions Anglo-American society is built upon. The anger generated in movements like AIM is further threatening because it, unlike the instances of “playing angry” that I explored in Chapter 1, is not mobilized by or for whites in service of the United States.

But is anger, one might ask, more relevant to Native Americans than to any other disadvantaged group? Wouldn’t any minority group seeking rights be portrayed by the majority as irrational, dangerous, or neutralized by its own infighting? While I agree that stereotypes of anger have often been mobilized as a hegemonic response to marginal groups, we should be attentive to how anger functions differently for particular groups over time. Certain representations have held import for American Indians; it was against the stereotype of the stoic warrior, for example, that the indigenous newspaper Warpath defined a new American Indian during the Civil Rights Movement: “The ‘Stoic, Silent Redman’ of the past who turned the other cheek to injustice is dead. (He died of frustration and heartbreak.) And in his place is an angry group of Indians. Hate and despair have taken their toll and only action can quiet this smoldering anger that has fused this new Indian movement into being” (quoted in T. Johnson 22). Thus stoicism cannot simply be dismissed as a stereotype applied to Native Americans; it is also a representation against which many indigenous people have understood and constructed their own resistance.
An Anger of Their Own

THAT DAZZLING WHIRLWIND

One of the main ways I have theorized anger in this book is in terms of entitlement: the sense that something one owns is unjustly taken away. “Entitlement” is usually a bad word among teachers, referring to students who expect good grades even when they haven’t earned them. But I’d like to rescue the word, if only momentarily, considering what it might tell us about productive anger in the American Indian literature classroom. I present here three case studies from my experience at a predominantly white university in which most students work one, two, or even three jobs year-round to pay their way through school. These case studies are just that; I have no intention of capturing the full spectrum of identities or forms of anger that exist in today’s college classroom. That said, I’m hoping these examples have some use value beyond my particular context.

Case Study #1

I confess that I often feel angry—or at least irritated—about some students’ stereotypes or misconceptions of American Indians. Upon reflection, I’ve realized that I feel entitled to a classroom in which students share, or are at least willing to entertain, a just, realistic view of Native Americans. I realize this might fly in the face of the educational philosophy that classrooms should be a space of open exchange—the kind of John Stuart Mill milieu I optimistically imagined before I started teaching, in which truth inevitably emerges once all voices are expressed. Indeed, the classroom can never be a kind of “pure” space free from the systematic equalities that exist beyond it. It’s more beneficial, then, if instructors are honest about what we feel entitled to, how our anger is tied up in our social identities, and how this translates into our teaching.

I’ve grown accustomed to (and I’m still irked by) a certain kind of Indian in my travels through student papers: one who is, more often than not, in the past tense. Anticipating this vanished American of student imaginations, I start each semester with a series of questions: (1) How many Native Americans live in the United States today? (The numbers they come up with rarely exceed 500,000.) (2) Name three famous Native Americans no longer living. (I get the usual suspects: Pocahontas, Geronimo, Sitting Bull.) (3) Name three Native Americans living today. (Blank stares.) Then we discuss why people tend to underestimate the
numbers and know far more about (certain) Native Americans from the past than the present. And when they do research on a tribal nation, I require them to include an analysis of the tribe today. All of this is, at least, a first step.

“The Indian” of the past tense isn’t the only figure I’ve come to regard with suspicion, however. I’m also wary of the “white man,” who shows up with uncanny persistence in many of the papers I read. The phrase is almost always followed by a note of his atrocities to “the Indian.” This invariably leaves me thinking that if we only could track down this “white man” and get rid of him, we’d all be better off. I’m not sure why the phrase bothers me so much; perhaps it makes me think of old westerns. Or maybe it’s the maleness—as I usually write in the margins, “man only?,” trying to get the writer to think about how white women are involved in colonization as well. But I suspect the phrase is like “mankind”—a term used, also to my dismay, for both sexes. Perhaps then I should be grateful for their inclusion of “white,” since whites are taught so well to forget our own racial position. But something tells me that this phrase comes, like the Indian of the past tense, from some reflexive, time-encrusted impulse that isn’t entirely thought through. In both cases, my aim is to get them to choose their words more carefully, to realize that neither “the Indian” nor “the white man” is a phrase to use casually.

In trying to take on this casual use of “the white man” who does something bad to “the Indian” of past tense, I spend a good deal of time deconstructing my students’ concepts of the real Indian. Wary of the popular images that my students collect like cobwebs in their wanderings through mass media, I use a number of techniques to challenge typical notions of authenticity: I distribute images like the advertisement for “Deer Shadow,” the Indian of no specific tribe offered for a mere $19.99 monthly installment (satisfaction guaranteed “or your money back”). I’ve also asked them to bring in positive and negative representations of Native Americans. One student’s misinterpretation of “negative representation” as a bad thing that happened to American Indians led to an interesting question: how can we represent an event like Wounded Knee ethically? Many of my students are too hasty to conflate Indianness with despair: as one wrote of Last Bird, a video about a survivor of Wounded Knee, “To me, this is as real as an Indian that you can get. Her whole life was misery and she was never accepted by society.” While I hope to steer my students away from any Pollyanna view of American history, this conflation of American Indians and misery is surely not an ideal destination. In choosing the representations that our non-Native students encounter, we must consider
what most effectively and ethically counters those images they have come to know so well. How, that is, can we tell a story that includes suffering without making that suffering the only story they remember?

Case Study #2

First, a caveat: I have had a number of non-Native students who express an anger that is more compatible with mine: an indignation about the less palatable parts of American history that they have not been taught before or the stereotypes of Indians they find so easily once their consciousness is raised. I sometimes worry, though, that this anger is characterized by the kind of missionary zeal I’ve discussed in this book: a non-Native anger on behalf of American Indians. So while I try to see this version of student anger as a useful starting point, I would not want to end there. As Deborah Miranda once reminded me, in the classroom my non-Native students and I are privileged in that we can get angry about Indian stereotypes without being read as after our own good, a privilege American Indians aren’t typically afforded.10

In teaching at higher education institutions in Michigan and West Virginia I have encountered some non-Native students who feel threatened by, and angry about, certain indigenous rights. There was the boy in Michigan, for example, who came from a community close to a Chippewa reservation and who had grown up hearing non-Natives complain about the casino money to which they did not feel the Chippewas were entitled. In response to such student anger, we can provide statistics about the reality of casinos and sovereignty, but we should remember that we are dealing with a deeply sedimented anger that is not likely to go away in a single semester.

Once, during a discussion of Sherman Alexie’s novel Indian Killer, a student described throwing her copy of the book across the room in disgust at its gruesome images. At the time, I let her stop there, but after more consideration I realize I should have pushed her further. I simply don’t buy it: most young people today are so inoculated to graphic violence in film and television that I doubt this in and of itself would provoke anger, especially the kind that inspires one to throw a book across the room. If I could have that moment back, I would ask her to point to a specific “gruesome” scene in the book so that we could identify what I suspect is at the root of this disgust: Native American anger at whites. During our class discussion I pointed to an interview I found with Sherman Alexie that includes the following exchange:
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SA: [I wrote Indian Killer] because I was sitting at Washington State with frat guys in the back row who I wanted to kill. And I would fantasize about murder.

JF: What were they doing that made you want to kill them?

SA: Just being white. Just drunk on their privilege, essentially. Showing up late, disrupting the class in all sorts of small ways that all added up to my thinking, “I want to kill them.” (quoted in Fraser 69–70)

His words drew some raised eyebrows and audible gasps among my students. We do no service to American Indian literature or authors, I believe, when we tiptoe around such anger or pretend it does not exist. In his keynote address at the 2007 Native American Literature Symposium, Alexie called Indian Killer a “racist piece of shit”—speaking, presumably, of its indigenous anger. Despite Alexie’s characteristic disowning of certain aspects of his work—or at least popular interpretations of it—I still find Indian Killer a rich text to include in a Native American literature course. Indeed, Alexie’s recent comment makes it all the more important, suggesting how some Native authors might reframe, or even renounce, the anger of their texts. Perhaps part of his response is to society’s message that people of color are not entitled to such “messy” anger.

These examples of student anger raise the following question: is there a non-Native anger at Native Americans that is not inherently colonialist or racist, and if so, what might it look like? As Audre Lorde reminds us, not all anger is equal: “For it is not the anger of Black women which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not my anger that launches rockets . . . slaughters children in cities, stockpiles nerve gas and chemical bombs, sodomizes our daughters and our earth” (133). At the same time, it seems possible to acknowledge the different weights that certain forms of anger, and certain individuals, are accorded while still engaging in a healthy dialogue in which all perceived entitlements are on the table. This is the classroom we should work toward.

Case Study #3

A woman of Ojibwe descent who is active in the Native American Studies Program at West Virginia University recently shared how irritated she was with a non-Native professor who insisted on calling American Indian
origin stories “myths”—a word he did not use for stories from the Bible. Her comment made me think more self-consciously about the words I use in the classroom, not out of what some call “political correctness,” but a commitment to accuracy, reason, and ethics. We have a lot to learn from such anger.

Case Study #4

While teaching Indian Killer, I asked students to break into groups to examine particular scenes from the novel. One group was asked to consider a moment in the book when Marie Polatkin, a Native woman, calls her white professor on his professed “expertise” in American Indian literature. I felt most uncomfortable—and, strangely, most satisfied—when a student asked me if I had ever been challenged as Marie challenges her professor. Although this was asked by a non-Native student, it was itself an implicit challenge—one that, I hope, makes me a better teacher. Perhaps most importantly, this circumvents the role of Native American students or teachers as the sole dismantlers of anti-Native racism. Given the right literary texts and contexts, the rest of us might just stumble upon some of the answers ourselves.

I have approached anger with the assumption that while it is not always the best strategy for resistance, it is not by default an “unhealthy” tactic. Philosopher Lynne McFall has argued that even bitterness, which is often thought to be the unhealthiest form of anger, is legitimate as a necessary and ongoing reminder of past (or present) injustice that would otherwise remain unacknowledged. Some may argue that a study of any literature through the lens of a single emotion is reductive, or that an emphasis on anger is inconsistent with American Indian values. Instead of psychoanalyzing or labeling indigenous peoples in particular ways, however, I have attempted to trace the strategies Native authors used to protest oppression when anger was particularly aligned with Indianness.

Some might say that my emphasis on anger and possession is a particularly western one that conflicts with Native collectivity. While I am attentive to what Jace Weaver has called “communitism,” I am also wary of the way that non-Natives have emphasized Native collectivism in order to undermine indigenous property rights. In contrast to the stereotype that Native Americans have little sense of property rights—a belief that conveniently works to condone the seizure of Native land and resources—by acknowledging the ways early American Indian women writers laid claim
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to Native land and rights in their narratives, we challenge this colonialist model. This is not to say that Native American conceptions of property are identical to those of whites, or that they take the same forms across indigenous nations. Rather, to acknowledge these rights as they are articulated in these texts is to acknowledge the rights themselves. And while the first published Native American women are not equally successful in their articulations of indigenous nationhood, their anger—and sentimentality—point toward an activist future in Native American literature. In Harjo’s poem, we see a similar invocation of connection across boundaries in order to assert indigenous nationhood. The anger that reverberates so clearly in Joy Harjo’s poem finds its roots here.