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### Seminar Paper: Rhetorical Sovereignty

Sovereignty has long been the struggle and the goal of Indigenous peoples all over the world, since their first contact with settler colonists. As Indigeneity was, and is, systematically erased in favor of a White society, sovereignty has been misunderstood and ignored by these settler colonial states and their lawmaking mechanisms. To this day, settler colonial states view sovereignty as something they recognize, rather than as something inherent to the Indigenous peoples that occupy that land. Rhetorical sovereignty, as explained by Scott Lyons, refers to the means with which Indigenous peoples resist colonization and maintain the narrative over their traditions (Lyons, 449). Rhetorical sovereignty is important because it encompasses not just how Indigenous peoples resist colonization, but how they enact their sovereignty through art, writing, storytelling, and through their own epistemologies. In this essay, I will explore how rhetorical sovereignty operates as decolonization.

First, it is necessary to discuss the nuance of Indigenous struggles for decolonization. It is clear that understandings of Indigenous peoples by Western academia are centered around histories of colonization and genocide. While these histories are clearly very important to understanding how Indigenous peoples are thriving today, Eve Tuck warns of the nature of this kind of damage-based research. In a midterm essay for Indigenous Feminisms, I write that:

According to Tuck, damage-based research is the reduction of Indigenous peoples and cultures to something suspended within time, a time in which they were structurally murdered and outlawed (Tuck, 413). It negates the rich histories, presents and futures of these tribes and ignores their agency. Tuck encourages us to look at Indigenous peoples through a desire-based lens, in which “understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (Tuck, 416) is the goal. She also notes that understanding Indigenous peoples when informed only by damage leaves room for us to pathologize them as people to be *damaged* (Tuck, 416) and this is a form of neocolonialism in and of itself. Decolonization is often seen as a concerted and directed focus of Indigenous peoples, but in reality, existing and maintaining their traditions while also taking advantage of modernization are forms of decolonization. Unlearning Western ideals with a preference for tradition is decolonization. Desire-based research allows us to view hope, survivance, and futures (Tuck, 417) and how that damage fits into this narrative, instead of the other way around. This framework should be considered so as to recognize where tribes are already practicing sovereignty, and how desire-based practice is a form of decolonization (Yonas).

Rhetorical sovereignty, then, builds on the desires of Indigenous peoples to create and maintain their communicative traditions, while simultaneously taking back ownership of their identities as posed by Western tradition. It is important to note, however, that Indigenous practices exist not simply as a reaction to colonialism. While many of those practices may have been erased or altered as a result of settler colonialism, the ways that Indigenous peoples choose to practice or revitalize those traditions are their own, and are rooted in their own ways of

knowing. Lisa King builds on Lyon's definition of rhetorical sovereignty by including that whatever public discourse that exists within Indigenous communities as sovereign nations must be operating from their own cultural contexts, not to be imposed upon by Western ideas, methods, systems, or laws (King, 219). However, she also notes that in pedagogical practice, rhetorical sovereignty is not to say that there can be no reciprocal relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous rhetorical practices (King, 219). Instead, its goal is to assert that those sovereign Indigenous states have the power to create their own meaning and knowledge (King, 219). In this way, rhetorical sovereignty is inherently decolonization—to expect that settler colonial states would give up the rhetorical and physical nation they have built on Indigenous land is unrealistic. Thus, Indigenous peoples taking up the space they deserve not only within modern constructions but within their own practices as well is a decolonizing praxis.

Cutcha Risling Baldy's book, *We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women's Coming of Age Ceremonies* takes a desire-based, sovereign approach to the revitalization of Hupa women's ceremonies. In a midterm essay for Indigenous Feminisms, I explore her book closely:

One aspect of Risling Baldy's approach is her denunciation of salvage ethnography, and the ways that anthropology has taken over the autonomy of Indigenous people in their own tellings of histories and cultures (Risling Baldy, 5). A desire-based, sovereign approach to anthropology as a whole would frame an Indigenous way of knowing by foregrounding an Indigenous presence—allowing Indigenous people control over how their stories are told and shared. Ethnographic refusal, in which Native peoples refuse to be part of anthropologist's ethnographic work (Risling Baldy, 80), is a form of colonial

resistance—an understanding of this as rhetorical sovereignty offers that Indigenous peoples deserve autonomy over their bodies in research. Rhetorical sovereignty would give Indigenous communities the credibility and freedom to tell their own stories.

Risling Baldy's ideas about (re)writing, (re)righting, and (re)riting Indigenous traditions is a unique way to frame a desire-based, sovereign approach. The goal of this framework is to use a Indigenous feminist analysis to combat Western ideas of Indigenous peoples and their traditions as static, dated, or uncivilized (Risling Baldy, 29-31). In revitalizing the Hupa Ch'itwa:l dance, the goal was not to simply recreate what Hupa ancestors had done, but to adapt it to fit modern Hupa life. She notes that “internalized patriarchal expressions of ceremonial practices are not traditional and illustrates how the revitalization of women's coming-of-age ceremonies center and reclaim Native feminisms” (Risling Baldy, 31). Colonial powers used conceptions of menstruation as a “taboo” to label Indigenous peoples as “uncivilized.” In reclaiming the traditional narrative about menstruation as a powerful turn into womanhood, and as something to be celebrated, the Hupa people work to decolonize gendered colonial rhetoric (Yonas).

While rhetorical sovereignty has implications for the inner workings of tribal communities, it also informs Indigenous relationships to the settler state. Indigenous peoples have also engaged with modern art, creativity, and production. There are a wide range of artists working to deconstruct colonial notions and images of Indigenous peoples, such as the group of Indigenous filmmakers and actors working to create a tribal identity in Hollywood as a means of solidarity (DeLucia et al.) In this way, rhetorical sovereignty means using cultural experiences to

create and foreground a true Indigenous presence, rather than being used as a prop in the Hollywood “wild west” trope. As well, Indigenous artists and creatives are also working to center their heritages completely aside from settler colonialism. Artists such as Mary Sully are creating their own exhibits and collections that feature their tribe’s cultures, forms and styles of art, and more (DeLucia et al.). Doing so not only denies Western notions about an “untamed people,” but empowers the rhetorical traditions of Indigenous peoples as worthy of study and admiration, as with any other cultural group. Indigenous peoples have also used rhetorical practices to combat legal impositions of settler colonial states, taking advantage of modern modes of communication and influence (DeLucia et al.).

Rage may be seen as an irrational emotion for Indigenous people to hold towards the settler state, so many years after their land was taken. However, as shown by Risling Baldy, colonization and decolonization are structures that persist through all modes of Indigenous life in relation to the settler state. Sarah Deer et al. discuss rage as a rhetorical tool to communicate and navigate relationships with activism, tribal behavior, and the colonial roles that the state continues to exhibit. They write that rage can create solidarity and an unwavering commitment to ending injustice, both from non-Indigenous states as well as within one’s own tribal community (Deer et al.) Rage may work with rhetorical sovereignty to practice decolonization because it begets the fierceness with which Indigenous peoples ground themselves in their traditions, and continue to take up space. However, rage may also work to burn out Indigenous activists who also believe in living their own lives, while thriving, as decolonization.

Essentializing Indigenous communities as a remnant of the past is one of the many ways Indigenous sovereignty and agency has been colonized. To understand rhetorical sovereignty, it must be understood that colonization and decolonization are an ongoing paradigm. Studying the means with which Indigenous communities build and enact culture through a colonial lens distorts hundreds of years of history. In fact, Indigenous traditions have survived and morphed throughout time. They have been hugely impacted by colonial history, surely—but more importantly, they are living, breathing, and maintaining their traditions today in new ways. Rhetorical sovereignty allows Indigenous communities to have control over their community building. It allows them to rewrite the contours of history and begin moving away from the Westernized image so pervasive today. It also allows Indigenous peoples spaces to engage within contemporary institutions, in a world where their voices can truly be heard. Rhetorical sovereignty is the only way to adequately learn from, teach, and understand Indigeneity, and is the only way to operate a decolonizing praxis.

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