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PART I

BIOCOLONIALISM AS IMPERIAL SCIENCE

Biocolonialism is in many respects more of the same – a continuation of the oppressive power relations that have historically informed the interactions of western and indigenous cultures, and part of a continuum of contemporary practices that constitute forms of cultural imperialism.[1] The first three chapters contextualize biocolonialism over time and within the broad range of these ongoing cultural practices. The phenomenon of cultural imperialism is addressed and critiqued. It is demonstrated to be consistent with (indeed, a continuation of) earlier forms of imperialism, and a preliminary sketch of biocolonialism is offered. The latter is then situated within the larger political struggles that have long inflected the relationship between dominant and indigenous knowledge systems.

The deep offensiveness and cultural destructiveness of biocolonialist practices can only be fully appreciated by seeing how profoundly they clash with many of the values and commitments that characterize and distinguish indigenous knowledge systems. The commodification of knowledge and of genetic resources that biocolonialism facilitates is sharply at odds with the web of prescriptions and proscriptions that guide the process of knowing within indigenous contexts. It also clashes directly with the role responsibilities toward the natural world that many indigenous peoples have historically assumed. The ideology that sustains biocolonialism is, in

[1] In making this claim, however, I do not mean to imply that imperialism itself, and the oppressive power relations it engenders and instantiates, have not themselves undergone significant and extensive change over the last several centuries. A range of substantive political transformations, as well as the globalized nature of contemporary economic and cultural exchanges, have unquestionably altered how imperialism manifests itself, how it impacts the lives of those it subordinates, and how it is in turn impacted by them.

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turn, rooted in the neopositivist assumption of value neutrality and in a practice of value bifurcation which together enable it to deflect ethical and political critique. It both facilitates the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems and provides thereby a legitimating rationale for biocolonialist practice.

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1

Imperialism Then and Now

Introduction: Some Exhibits

An exhibit, in a court of law, is anything other than oral testimony that is placed before the fact finder to be admitted as evidence in a case. This chapter opens with four exhibits, best marked for identification as diverse instances of cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism[1] is one of a number of oppressive relations that may hold between dominant and subordinated cultures. Whether or not conscious and intentional, it serves to extend the political power, secure the social control, and further the economic profit of the dominant culture. Ultimately, it facilitates a type of cultural acquisition via conceptual, even material, assimilation; the dominant culture seeks to establish itself in indigenous cultures by appropriating, mining, and redefining what is distinctive in, or constitutive of, them. The mechanism

[1] Various radical theorists and social critics have alluded to cultural imperialism, although few characterize it at length. My discussion differs somewhat from that of Iris Marion Young ("Five Faces of Oppression," in Thomas Wartenberg (ed.), *Rethinking Power* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1992)). I agree with her that it is one of several forms of oppression, but I emphasize its impact on the cultures, rather than the individuals, subjected to it. I move freely here between references to indigenous cultures generally, and native North American cultures more specifically, because the practice of cultural imperialism under consideration is similarly imposed upon them. However, closer analyses of how specific historical, political, cultural, and socioeconomic circumstances condition and modify such practice are needed.

Within world-systems theory, Herbert Schiller describes cultural imperialism as "The sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system." *Communication and Cultural Domination* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1976): 9. For an excellent collection of contemporary essays on this topic, see Bernd Hamm and Russell Smandych (eds.), *Cultural Imperialism: Essays on the Political Economy of Cultural Domination* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2005).

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for this, as we will see, is an oft-repeated pattern of cultural subordination that turns vitally on legal and popular views of ownership and property, as formulated within the dominant culture.

Exhibit One records two recent events. In 1991, at a large gathering in California, a leading figure of the New Age movement announced to the assembled audience that he intended to patent the sweat lodge ceremony because native people were no longer performing it correctly.[2] Several years later, at a meeting of indigenous support groups in Geneva, the young Europeans in attendance were informed of the passing of a respected Muskogee Creek medicine man, widely known for his defense of the right of American Indians to retain control of their own spiritual ceremonies. On learning of his death, "they were heard to openly rejoice."[3]

Exhibit Two documents a controversy in Kansas over the skeletal remains of 146 Smoky Hill River people that were transformed into a tourist site, known as the Salina Burial Pit, visited by thousands each year. Cultural descendants of these people – including the Pawnee, Wichita, Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa – protested this as a racist violation of common human decency. Some scientists and historians, however, maintain that such human remains are vital for research and education. According to one of them: "It's an issue all over the United States . . . a real clash between science and religion. . . . There is a concerted effort by American Indians to shut down archaeology all over the country."[4] Walter Echo-Hawk, a lawyer with the Native American Rights Fund, sees it differently:

> There appears to be a loophole in legal protections and social policies that tends to permit disparate treatment of dead bodies and graves based on race. . . . If you desecrate an Indian grave, you get a Ph.D. But if you desecrate a white grave, you wind up sitting in prison.[5]

Exhibit Three concerns the Guajajara. Their medical knowledge has long prescribed the use of a plant, the Latin name of which is *Pilocarpus jaborandi*, to treat glaucoma. That they are no longer able to use it is the direct result of biocolonialism. *Pilocarpus* populations have been virtually

[2] This was related by Robert Antone in "Education as a Vehicle for Values and Sovereignty," an address given at the Third International Native American Studies Conference at Lake Superior State University in October 1991.

[3] José Barreiro, "The Search for Lessons," *Akwe:kon*, Vol. IX, No. 2 (1992): 22.

[4] Cited in Larry Fruhling, "Culture Collides With Archaeology Over Ancestors Graves," *The Santa Fe New Maxican* (23 April, 1989): C4.

[5] Ibid.

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depleted as Brazil has exported it for some $25 million annually, and corporations holding patents derived from it have earned far more. As for the Guajajara, they have been subjected to debt peonage and slavery by the agents of the companies involved in the trade.[6]

Exhibit Four is a photograph of a Guaymi Indian woman whose name is being kept secret. If she is alive today, she is well into middle age. Diagnosed with leukemia in 1991, she sought treatment in a hospital in Panama City. While there, samples of her blood were drawn and her cell line was "immortalized" and stored in the United States, without her knowledge or consent. Two American scientists, listing themselves as "inventors" of her cell line, applied for its patent in 1993 and placed her cell line on sale at the American Type Culture Collection for $136. They did so on behalf of the Center for Disease Control because of the cell line's commercial promise and because the government encourages scientists to patent anything of interest. According to one of them,

> I think that most people wouldn't understand all the details of all the laboratory work that was being done and I don't think anyone ever really felt it was necessary . . . So in terms of specifically notifying the Guaymi that a patent application was being put forth, I don't think that was done. But again, mainly because I don't think anyone ever felt it was really necessary.[7]

Exhibits Three and Four, concrete examples of biocolonialism, share important contextual features with the first two. All four Exhibits attest to the conflict of knowledge systems within contemporary dominant and indigenous cultures, and to the existence of oppressive relations of power which promote such conflict. All four involve struggles over the politics of ownership – respectively, of spiritual knowledge, of human remains, of plant genetic resources and medicinal knowledge, and of human genetic resources. All four demonstrate the intervention of western property law in

[6] Darrell Addison Posey, "Biodiversity, Genetic Resources, and Indigenous Peoples in Amazonia." Prepared for: Amazonia 2000: Development, Environment, and Geopolitics. Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London (24–26 June 1998). Available online at: http://www.ubcic.bc.ca/files/PDF/Posey_Biodiversity.pdf.

[7] Jonathan Kaplan, "Who Owns Life?: Patenting Human Genes," *Living On Earth* (World Media Foundation, transcript of 13 May 1994). See also Philip Bereano, "Body and Soul: The Price of Biotech," *Seattle Times*, 20 August 1995, B5 and Philip Bereano, "The Race to Own DNA: Guaymi Tribe Was Surprised They Were Invented: Part II," *Seattle Times*, 27 August 1995, B5. The U.S. Commerce Department abandoned its application in 1993, following extensive protests by indigenous peoples, among others.

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a manner that privileges the already powerful and violates the sovereignty of indigenous peoples.

Because an important strain of the indigenist response to biocolonialism turns on spiritual beliefs about the nature of life and about human responsibilities within the natural world, it is appropriate to begin with an analysis of Exhibit One. The commodification of indigenous spirituality is a paradigmatic instance of cultural imperialism. As such, it plays a politically vital, diversionary role, serving to colonize and assimilate the knowledge and belief systems of indigenous cultures.

Marketing Native America

Whether peddled by white shamans, plastic medicine men and women, opportunistic academics, entrepreneurs, or enterprising New Agers, Indian spirituality – like Indian lands before it – is rapidly being reduced to the status of a commodity, seized, and sold. Sacred ceremonies and ceremonial objects can be purchased at weekend medicine conferences or via mail-order catalogs. How-to books with veritable recipes for conducting traditional rituals are written and dispensed by trade publishers. A succession of born-again medicine people have – with greater or lesser subtlety – set themselves and their services up for hire, ready to sell their spiritual knowledge and power to anyone willing and able to meet their price. And a literary cult of Indian identity appropriation known as white shamanism continues to be practiced. Instead of contributing to the many Native-run organizations devoted to enhancing the lives and prospects of Indian people, New Agers are regularly enticed into contributing to the continued expropriation and exploitation of Native culture by purchasing an array of items marketed as means for enhancing their knowledge of Indian spirituality.[8]

Recently, the National Congress of American Indians (an organization not exactly known for radicalism), issued a "declaration of war" against "non-Indian wannabes, hucksters, cultists, commercial profiteers and self-styled New Age shamans" who have been exploiting sacred knowledge and rituals.[9] Throughout Indian Country, eloquent, forceful critiques of

[8] For a discussion of the New Age (especially as it bears on the marketing of indigenous spirituality), and for a survey of many of its products and practitioners (and prices!), see Lisa Aldred, "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dance," *American Indian Quarterly* 24:3 (2000).

[9] David Johnston, "Spiritual Seekers Borrow Indian Ways," *New York Times*, 27 December 1993, A15.

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these cultural developments have been mounted by writers, intellectuals, activists, and spiritual leaders. The phenomena being protested are diverse and include literary, artistic, scholarly, and commercial products intended for consumption in the markets of popular culture as well as in those of the cultural elite.[10]

When the spiritual knowledge, rituals, and objects of historically subordinated cultures are transformed into commodities, economic and political powers merge to produce cultural imperialism. A form of oppression exerted by a dominant society upon other cultures, and typically a source of economic profit, cultural imperialism secures and deepens the subordinated status of those cultures. In the case of indigenous cultures, it undermines their integrity and distinctiveness, assimilating them into the dominant culture by seizing and processing vital cultural resources, then remaking them in the image and marketplaces of the dominant culture. Such "taking of the essentials of cultural lifeways," Geary Hobson observes, "is as imperialistic as those simpler forms of theft, such as the theft of homeland by treaty."[11]

It is a phenomenon that spans North America, sparking the fierce resistance of indigenous people in Canada, as well as the United States. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, a Toronto-based Anishinabe poet and storyteller, is a founding member of the Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster, an organization devoted to reclaiming the native voice in literature. The Canadian cultural industry, she protests,

> is stealing – unconsciously, perhaps, but with the same devastating results – native stories as surely as the missionaries stole our religion and the politicians stole our land and the residential schools stole our language . . . (it) amount(s) to cultural theft, theft of voice.[12]

[10] Christopher Lind misses the nature of this protest and of the "claim being made by aboriginal artists and writers of colour . . . that whites are 'stealing' their stories." See "The Idea of Capitalism or the Capitalism of Ideas? A Moral Critique of the Copyright Act," *Intellectual Property Journal*, 7 (December 1991): 69. He insists that "(w)hat is being stolen is not the story itself but the market for the story . . . or the possibility of being able to exploit the commercial potential" (ibid.) of the story. Indigenous critiques are directed against the very fact of commercialization, against the extension of the market mechanism to these cultural materials by the dominant society. The claim being made is that this continues and extends a long history of oppression, that it constitutes theft of culture, of voice, of power.

[11] Geary Hobson (ed.), *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1979): 101.

[12] Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, "Stop stealing native stories," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 26 January 1990, A7.

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Wendy Rose makes it plain that the issue here is not that "only Indians can make valid observations on themselves" and their cultures, rather, it is "one of integrity and intent":

> We accept as given that whites have as much prerogative to write and speak about us and our cultures as we have to write and speak about them and theirs. The question is how this is done and . . . why it is done.[13]

Some forms of cultural imperialism are the products of academic privilege and opportunism. The "name of Truth or Scholarship"[14] may be invoked, the cause of scholarly progress, of advancing knowledge.[15] Anishinabe author Gerald Vizenor reproaches the "culture cultists (who) have hatched and possessed distorted images of tribal

[13] Wendy Rose, "The Great Pretenders," in M. Annette Jaimes (ed.), *The State of Native America* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1992): 415–16.

[14] Hobson, *The Remembered Earth*, 101.

[15] Cultural imperialism is often at its apex in the academy. As a result of the stubborn influence of positivism, knowledge claims within the dominant (academic) culture continue to be regarded as value free, as we consider at length in Chapter 3. An instructive example of this is Wilcomb Washburn's "Distinguishing History from Moral Philosophy and Public Advocacy," in Calvin Martin (ed.), *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). A past president of the American Society for Ethnohistory, Washburn is particularly upset about "the process of using history to promote non-historical causes." He reacts with consternation to the call for historians to "form alliances with non-scholarly groups organized for action to solve specified societal problems," which he associates with "leftist academics" and "Indian activists."(p. 95)

Washburn offers himself as an example of an historian committed to what one is tempted to call a Great White Truth, a Truth properly cleansed of all values:

> all my efforts are guided by, and subject to, the limitations of historical truth . . . There is no place in the scholarly profession of history for such distorting lenses. History to me means a commitment to truth . . . however contradictory it may be to our . . . acquired convictions about how the world should be. (p. 97)

He assumes that his work, like his conception of truth, is unburdened by such distorting lenses, and remains both value free and politically neutral. Yet note that this work includes his "recent experiences in writing Indian history, which involve combat with radical theorists on the ideological front," his letters to the *Dartmouth Review* in support of the use of the Indian as a symbol, his efforts abroad to "justify United States policy . . . to spike assertions of genocide . . . to disprove the assertion that . . . multinational corporations control the United States Government and seek to exploit the resources of all native peoples against their will." (p. 94) All this, we are to suppose, is 'value free.' He goes on to claim that some will recognize his "lifelong and quixotic pursuit of the reality of the Indian as 'noble.'" (p. 97)

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cultures."[16] Their obsession with the tribal past, he contends, "is not an innocent collection of arrowheads, not a crude map of public camp sites in sacred places, but rather a statement of academic power and control over tribal images."[17] Sometimes the "cause" is one of ethical progress, of moral duty: "Given the state of the world today, we all have not only the right but the obligation to pursue all forms of spiritual insight . . . it seems to me that I have as much right to pursue and articulate the belief system of Native Americans as they do."[18] On this reading, the colonization of indigenous knowledge and belief systems (and the attendant economic profit that their repackaging brings in the marketplaces of the dominant culture) is not only morally permissible, it is morally mandated.

Whatever its form, cultural imperialism often plays a diversionary role that is politically advantageous because it serves to extend – while effectively diverting attention from – the continued oppression of indigenous peoples. Acoma Pueblo writer Simon Ortiz underscores this aspect of the phenomenon. Condemning white shamanism as a "process of colonialism" and a "usurping (of) the indigenous power of the people," he charges that:

> symbols are taken and are popularized, diverting attention from real issues about land and resources and Indian peoples' working hours. The real struggle is really what should be prominent, but no, it's much easier to talk about drums and feathers and ceremonies and those sorts of things. "Real Indians," but "real Indians" only in quotes, stereotypes, and "interesting exotica" . . . So it's a rip-off.[19]

Keeshig-Tobias refers to it as "escapist" and a "form of exorcism," enabling Canadians "to look to an ideal native living in never-never land" rather than confront "the horrible reality of native-Canadian relations."[20] The extent to which cultural imperialism turns on conceptual colonization, and what is ultimately at stake in this, has been succinctly captured by Oneida scholar

[16] Gerald Vizenor, "Socioacupuncture: Mythic Reversals and the Striptease in Four Scenes," in Calvin Martin (ed.), *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 183.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Gary Snyder, as cited in Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1992): 192.
[19] Simon Ortiz in an interview in Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln, Nebraska. University of Nebraska Press, 1990): 111–12.
[20] Keeshig-Tobias, "Stop stealing," 7.

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Pam Colorado. She contends that the commodification of indigenous spirituality enables the dominant culture to supplant Indian people even in the area of their own spirituality. This process moves beyond ensuring their physical subordination to securing absolute ideological/conceptual subordination. If it continues, she observes:

> Non-Indians will have complete power to define what is and is not Indian, even for Indians . . . When this happens, the last vestiges of real, Indian society and Indian rights will disappear. Non-Indians will then "own" our heritage and ideas as thoroughly as they now claim to own our land and resources.[21]

The Cultural Politics of Ownership

When confronted by their critics, those engaged in the marketing of Native America frequently do attempt to justify their behavior. From their reasoning and rhetoric, we can elicit some distinctive features of this variant of cultural imperialism. What we will find is a rationale that has reverberated throughout the history of dominant–indigenous relations, one that starkly reveals how the cultural politics of ownership are played out in the context of oppression.

Consider Gary Snyder's response to indigenous protests: "Spirituality is not something that can be 'owned' like a car or a house," he asserts. It "belongs to all humanity equally."[22] Or consider Alberto Manguel's response to Keeshig-Tobias: "No one," he contends, "can 'steal' a story because stories don't belong to anyone. Stories belong to everyone . . . No one . . . has the right to instruct a writer as to what stories to tell."[23] Yet those who write and copyright "native" stories, those white shamans who sell poetry that "romanticize(s) their 'power' as writers to inhabit (Indian) souls and consciousness,"[24] and those culture capitalists who traffic in "Indian" rituals and sacred objects are all clearly making individual profit on what "no one" (allegedly) owns. Such responses are both diversionary and delusionary. They attempt to dictate the terms of the debate by focusing

[21] Pam Colorado, as cited in Ward Churchill, *Fantasies*, 101.
[22] Snyder, as cited in Ward Churchill, *Fantasies*, 192.
[23] Alberto Manguel, "Equal rights to stories," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 3 February 1990, D7.
[24] Leslie Silko, as cited in Michael Castro, *Interpreting the Indian* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1983): 161.

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