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## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

Words in the Wilderness: Critical Literacy in the Borderlands. By Stephen Gilbert Brown.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4ht95979>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 26(4)

### ISSN

0161-6463

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### Publication Date

2002-09-01

### DOI

10.17953

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important changes in the market. He also elucidates the process that forms adapted from basketry to satisfy the needs of changing markets came to be identified as the most “authentic,” thus, the most valuable forms. Further, he explains the way the debate surrounding the authenticity of pictorial forms has reflected and participated in the construction of race, class, gender, and nationality.

Phillips’s study of the development of early- to mid-nineteenth century Central Great Lakes quilled barkwork, a form with origins in both Native American and Victorian traditions, demonstrates how a close visual analysis such as Feder advocated can illuminate the ways in which traditional forms and practices have survived. Phillips explains that the interest in such transcultural forms has been stimulated by current scholarly discourse on contact zones and the cultural impact of colonialism on Native cultures. Further, Phillips provides an interesting discussion of how transcultural forms of commodity production can function as means of negotiation of cultural and economic survival in the face of seemingly overwhelming pressures to assimilate. Offering a new take on “authenticity” in American Indian art, Phillips asserts that such forms of expression should be regarded as possessed of greater, rather than less, authenticity than those items more commonly viewed as “traditional” native forms. These transcultural forms, she contends, have offered effective strategies of self-presentation and preservation of cultures that have allowed native artisans to convey their unique histories while, at the same time, they have satisfied their colonizers’ desire for demonstration of modern industriousness (and, presumably, assimilation).

Feest’s book makes a valuable contribution to the field. It is especially noteworthy for the range of approaches it brings to bear on and for the ways in which it illuminates the recent developments in Native American art history.

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**Words in the Wilderness: Critical Literacy in the Borderlands.** By Stephen Gilbert Brown. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. 241 pages. \$55.50 cloth.

Stephen Gilbert Brown’s career as an Alaskan bush teacher began at San Francisco State University where he attended a teacher recruitment seminar designed to attract newly licensed teachers to the Last Frontier. Alaska has always had a problem filling vacancies in rural bush communities. Many of those hired are misguided by some romantic notion of Alaska as portrayed in the popular television series, *Northern Exposure*. Village life is something you have to experience firsthand to understand. It is a world where the collision of two cultures, colonizer and colonized, is far more recent than you would find in other places in the world, even in most of Native America. With the chasm of race and culture too wide a gap for most, many teachers recruited from “outside” quit before the end of the first year. Few last more than a year

or two.

Brown eventually secured a teaching post in the remote Athabaskan village of Nyotek on the western side of Cook Inlet, a forty-five minute bush plane ride from Anchorage, Alaska's metropolis where the best teaching jobs are located. Landing on a remote airstrip with Jack London's classic *Call of the Wild* in his backpack, Brown was greeted by graffiti spray-painted on the side of an old building that said in big letters, "Welcome to the Nyotek Hilton! Rezervation Required!" (p. 37). On his first day of class, a mixed-race student gave him a one-fingered salute while defiantly asking, "Why should we listen to anything you say? You'll just be gone in two years anyway!" (p. 42). As the semester continued, Brown lost his faith and resolve in teaching his students what to them was meaningless, irrelevant, and to Brown, increasingly unethical. He discovered that the dominant culture's idea of education strips Native students of their culture, identity, initiative, and perpetrates the stereotypes of Native Americans created by the dominant culture. In such a public school system, Indian "Ways of Knowing" are taught for only one week a year during multicultural week and ignored altogether for the rest of the year.

In desperation, Brown turned to alternative views of education pioneered by critical literacy guru Paulo Friere, champion of the oppressed and originator of resistance pedagogy. Synthesizing ideas from radical educators such as Kenneth Bruffee (basic writing pioneer), Mary Louise Pratt (contact zone theorist), and Gerald Graff (conflict teaching theory), and incorporating postcolonialist and postmodern critical theories promulgated by theorists and philosophers such as Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldua, Brown designed a curriculum that answered and resisted the oppression, displacement, and cultural genocide perpetrated by traditional theories of literacy and schooling.

With these theoretical underpinnings, as well as using a model taken from the immensely popular Foxfire Project, a hands-on approach to resisting acculturation in 1970s Appalachia, Brown metaphorically threw the canon out the window and left the classroom for the boreal forest where he and his students, with the help of a tribal culture-bearer, constructed a survival camp and gathered materials to make dogsleds, snowshoes, and a traditional craft for hunting beluga whales in Cook Inlet. The project crossed the curriculum, as the journalism students recorded the events through tape and interviews, the yearbook/writing publication class transformed the data into publishable form, and the entire year-long project involved the community in a process of revitalizing and meaningfully validating traditional Athabaskan lifeways and culture.

Brown's "alter/native" curriculum was not without its flaws. He readily acknowledges that by privileging and foregrounding "native arts and crafts," they later were marketed and turned into a commodity as the students sold their products for profit. Thus, he played into the hands of the dominant culture that exploits and attempts to "possess" the Native by possessing its artifacts.

Returning to the drawing board, Brown developed another perspective on resistance pedagogy—the Frierean perspective. The late Brazilian Paulo Friere was champion of the oppressed, the colonized and the marginalized in a world dominated by the oppressor and the colonizer. He believed that literacy was meaningless unless it empowered the oppressed to resist the oppressor in the

real world of critical issues—who controlled the land, the resources, and the people. Marxist in ideology and deliberately liberatory and activist in perspective, Friere theorized that the only legitimate goal of education was to liberate and democratize the downtrodden.

Brown settled on this perspective as a way to preserve and protect the Athabaskan culture. Not content with sewing mukluks and manufacturing dogsleds, he envisioned the Athabaskans taking on the dominant government and multinational corporations that were currently in the process of taking their resources and initiative away from them. He proposed that his students galvanize the community into becoming involved in critical community issues of resisting the timber companies and multinational corporations while seeking to overturn the Alaska Native Lands Claims Settlement (ANLCS), what he called “a monument to the insidious ingenuity of the colonizer’s signifying practices, as embodied in the treaty-making documents that have for centuries been deployed to wrest ‘title’ of native lands away from the native” (p. 199). Only then, he concluded, is education in the dominant culture justified: when it is used to subvert and resist dominant culture, thus protecting and preserving native culture.

Overall, *Words in the Wildemess* is a very good resource for educators teaching in a contact zone, be it in Alaska, South Texas, California, at a reservation school, or even in Australia’s Outback. As an enrolled Indian from an Alaska village and an educator, I (J. Smelcer) find that one of the weaknesses of the book is the idea that teachers need to empower or “save” Native peoples. It’s similar to the missionary’s zeal to save Indians from themselves, a sense that whites who only know Indians from old westerns can teach us how to reclaim our identity and our heritage. Another weakness of the book might be its readability. Although the book is written in what ostensibly would be a readable format—a self-reflective narrative style—the incorporation of dense theories of composition, rhetoric, and postcolonial, postmodern philosophies in later chapters sometimes obfuscates the power of his discoveries, especially if the reader is not thoroughly schooled in the theoretical underpinnings of Brown’s proposed pedagogy for the borderlands. The strengths of the book paradoxically lie in the theories of education he incorporates, but only when he couches those theories in classroom activities that put these theories into practice. He does an excellent job of incorporating dense theory into practice, an answer to many of the criticisms leveled at theoretical educational treatises.

As Brown ended his tenure as a bush teacher, he had answers to the questions he first posited as he flew over Nyotek, watching the curling plumes of smoke rising from the fish smoking sheds—he knew how, what, and why a white bush teacher comes to Alaska to teach: not, as he originally thought, to inspire and assimilate Natives into the dominant culture, but, like so many other “Cheechakos” (outsiders), to discover himself and examine his motivations for trying to “go native.” In the end, he discovered that the white bush teacher should take a long, hard look in the mirror to see if the person in the mirror is part of the solution or part of the problem.

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