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COMMENTARY

On Leaking Languages and Categorical Imperatives

Philip J. Deloria

SINCERITY AND RITUAL

I mean every word of it when I say that I am honored, touched, and engaged by the contributors' decision to take "unexpectedness" as an organizing principle for this special issue. I thank them, along with fellow commentator Paul Kroskrity, for using my work to shape analytical forms in the area of linguistic anthropology and discourse analysis. I am grateful that such a fine group of scholars has made such use of my humble efforts, which are preliminary explorations at best.

But wait. Isn't it the case that such a statement as I have just made is more-or-less obligatory? I knew from the moment Leighton Peterson gave me this assignment that my comment would begin with this particular bit of language. It is how I feel, but it's also what is expected and conventional. To do anything less—or to criticize the articles unduly, as if from on high—would be churlish. Such a statement as mine is a cultural artifact, freighted with ritual meanings and familiar, though long, histories of the (often, but not always) sincere thanks and disclaimers that open countless books, chapters,

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and public utterances. Nineteenth-century (supposedly) vernacular writers made the introductory disclaimer into a fine art, offering preemptive ducking and weaving that sounded something like this: "I have no literary skill, no artistic vision, no higher aims; I'm a simple person called to record my humble life for whatever small audience might, through some quirk of their own circumstance, find it of some minor interest." Most writers did not believe this for a second.

This compulsion to disclaim does not often characterize contemporary academic writing. We speak so as to be heard, while knowing that the occasions will be few. We seek to make "interventions." We wish to shape conversations, and we take pride in the rare moments when it seems we have done so. But it is, at least for me, disconcerting when such shaping actually shows up on the page. What results is a decidedly odd mixture of sensibilities. I want to see myself as a humble person, which is hard to square with pride and pleasure. Or is it that I want others to see me as a humble person, that pride is my own secret vice, and my public stance is one of gratitude because, well . . . anything less would be churlish? Am I truly grateful? If so, how do I square that with the occasional whiff of defensiveness? These uncertainties are cultural artifacts; ones that take specific shape in my own subjectivity and then shape the way that I offer my comment.

I move through these responses—and there are many more—not merely as an exercise in public self-indulgence. (After all, reader, you still do not really know what's actually going on inside my head. I cannot be completely sure myself!) Rather, they lead to some of the central questions that tie these articles together: How do we map one thing (a feeling, a language) onto another (a written utterance, a social body)? How do we conceptualize useful analytical or descriptive boundaries while still accounting for "leaks" (to borrow Kroskrity's borrowing) in such things as grammar, linguistic practice, cultural meaning, and social relations? How do we wrap our minds around the multiplicity of the lived world—our languages, our emotional responses—while using categories as primary tools for thought? Life, after all, tends to plague otherwise useful categories with an abundance of leaks.

EXPECTATION AND PRODUCTION

Each of the articles in this special issue engages these kinds of questions, building upon two fundamental insights. First, American Indian linguistic practices have been consistently imagined by non-Indians in ways that function to the detriment of Indian desires for justice, recognition, and power. Second, American Indian people have lived lives (and sometimes expressed

their desires and difference) through complex linguistic engagements that stand in contradistinction to those non-Indian imaginings. The articles reveal the first instance in rich detail. Anthony Webster and Barbra Meek, for instance, demonstrate the multiple ways that Indians speaking English are framed as always already inferior, for they consistently “fail” to acquire grammar, as in the case of the writer Blackhorse Mitchell, or to succeed in the English-language classroom. The result is an expectation—in Kroskrity’s terms, a non-Native language ideology—that assumes Indians will speak some variant of what Meek has named “Hollywood Indian English,” a failing English marked by the “bad grammar” of misplaced plurals and pronouns, populated not by sheep but by “sheeps.” Wesley Leonard’s case study of the *myaamia* language and culture reclamation makes clear that Indians speaking Indian languages are subject to a similar set of damaging cultural expectations: Indian languages can easily become “extinct,” never—ever—to return. They are probably best saved for ceremonial uses rather than everyday communication. They don’t actually change over time and in contact with other languages; they can only be contaminated and degraded. Pure languages are most likely found among pure peoples. Language maps with unnatural precision onto identifiable and bounded social groups. As Meek points out, non-Indians expect Indian linguistic failure on not one but two fault lines. Not only do Indians fail to speak English well, but also they—according to non-Indian language ideologies—fail to speak or learn their own languages successfully. When it comes to language, it seems clear—at least in terms of expectations—that Indians are in a no-win situation.

The articles are no less rich in framing the second issue, that of Indian linguistic complexity. As Peterson reveals, Navajo filmmakers can internalize these same kinds of non-Indian language ideologies and make them determinative factors in the difficult and cost-sensitive decisions that accompany a film. At the same time, filmmakers such as Nanobah Becker, Bennie Klain, and Larry Blackhorse Lowe use the language to privilege Diné audiences and to create among them a circle of social intimacy. They explicitly and implicitly engage the same kinds of metaquestions raised by Leonard—which are also raised by the on-the-ground generational dynamics of the Navajo social world. Rejecting the earliest ethnographic film experiments—which aimed to create Navajo alterity—these filmmakers aim instead for cultural intimacy and a contestation of supposed Indian techno-aesthetic inadequacy.

Such projects as these engage the constant demand for the articulations of cultural difference that support the ongoing project of Indian political sovereignty. Erin Debenport takes us inside a Tiwa-language-class soap opera, a learning tool developed by students that centers linguistic ideology in a wide-ranging riff on generational relations, enrollment politics, language games, and

interpersonal and cross-cultural subjectivity. Webster demands a broader sense of what counts as Navajo language, offering a powerful and evocative reading of Navajo Englishes as embodied and exemplified in the work of Mitchell and made visible through a thorough discourse analysis. Even forms of the English language, Webster argues, can carry Diné content and meaning, and writers like Mitchell are self-consciously using English in Navajo ways. One of the most joyously, ridiculously beautiful passages in this issue has surely to revolve around the poor Terry Allen—would-be muse, editor, teacher, and taskmaster, who cannot see beyond the need for grammar—utterly clueless as Mitchell sits down at his desk and produces a small, lovely poem, “The Drifting Lonely Seed,” that is at once aesthetically powerful and directly critical of his boarding-school experience and her own tutelage. She cannot see either thing, however, and praises the piece only for its alignment of subjects, verbs, tenses, and plurals.

CULTURE AND POWER

The articles make it abundantly clear that both non-Indian expectation and Indian linguistic and cultural production are rich with texture, variation, contradiction, and overlap. They speak back and forth to one another in dialogical (and perhaps dialectical) fashion. If, as Walter Benjamin oft dreamed, we could freeze the mysterious motion between them and perceive with a utopian vision that captured detail and totality, we might truly understand, well . . . everything. Failing that, however, we are reduced at every turn to thinking with categories, fantastically useful buckets of analysis that are, nonetheless, always limiting and always leaky. You know these: multi- or bilingualism, code switching, social intimacy, colonialism, Herderian folk nationalism, language extinction, and self-determination, among many others. These categories help us make sense of the world’s proliferation, but they also have a tendency to simplify themselves, to turn—even as we speak—into broader and cruder categories. Before we know what has happened, the delicate thin-walled clay *olla*, full of the subtleties of local knowledge and human complication, and useful for carrying small amounts of water, has transformed into a massive cast-iron foundry bucket, pouring out bludgeoning rivers of molten steel. Lisa Philips describes exactly this kind of shift, for example, noting the ways that historical trajectories “are usually framed in terms of state domination and control of economic capital. The histories are framed in terms of winners and losers, and, more recently, in terms of power and domination or of colonizer and colonized.”¹

Philips suggests thinking beyond what she describes as an “admittedly compelling Foucauldian analysis of power relations,” hoping instead for an

analysis open to multiplicity, one that would not “preclude other possible [analytical] configurations that facilitate individual (and group) interactions that do not involve mediation between [state or colonial] powers.”² Philips has put her finger on one of those moments of paradox and possibility—because Michel Foucault was everywhere concerned not simply with the state and with obvious dominations but also with multiplicity and the permeating micro-physics of power. Foucault would seem to offer a perfect theoretical platform for Philips’s interests in trading old-school linguistic mapping for a new world of leaking and multiple language practices borne out of everyday economies and needs. But Foucault’s vision of power does not always translate well to moments of encounter and exchange. Take, for example, Greg Dening’s superb book, *Mr. Bligh’s Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theater on the Bounty*, which offers an utterly brilliant Foucauldian reading of the ship-bound world of the *Bounty*, but then shifts away from this vision of power as Mr. Bligh and his crew arrive on “the beach” (which becomes a central metaphoric analytical structure) and confront a radically different group of people.³

We need not become attached to salvaging a particular French theorist in order to understand the dimensions of the problem. Scholars have elaborated potent tools for considering the complexities of power within relatively bounded social systems. Foucault and Antonio Gramsci have long offered compelling platforms for building such tools. Likewise, we have developed tools for considering the complexities of power when two (or more) distinct social, political, economic, and cultural systems collide and contest with one another. In American Indian studies, our keywords for such collision over the last decades have been *conquest* and *colonialism*. We’ve defined a range of possible colonialisms, ranging from the classic implantation of economically and demographically defined settler colonies to the cultural, emotional, and psychological attacks on Indian people taking place in boarding schools, missionary churches, and reservation-management systems.⁴ As the reverse process of “decolonization” has been inevitably linked with self-determination, sovereignty, and Indian nationhood, it has been easy to fall into sometimes dualistic conceptions: colonizer/colonized, American nation/Indian nation, structure/agency, and strong/weak.

Such dualistic language is political and serves political purposes. I would not dismiss any of it. But no scholar I know wants to live for long in these kinds of dualisms, most particularly those scholars concerned with the highly leaky arenas of meaning that we capture—crudely—in the big foundry bucket labeled “culture.” In *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, Richard White famously argued that when military and economic power relations among Indians and Europeans were basically equal (that is, when colonialism was not the dominant mode of

relation), human beings who were engaged in on-the-ground practice created new cultural forms, tropes, expressions, performances, and signifying systems.⁵ Such systems, if sufficiently understood, might well have proved amenable to those following the French or Italian theoretical connection to the question of power within a singular, shared cultural frame.

It was almost immediately recognized that one could just as easily imagine new cultural forms, tropes, expressions, performances, and signifying systems being created under conditions in which military and economic power was not equivalent—that is, under colonial conditions. Two conditions of analysis collide: the one concerned with the multiplicity, subtlety, and contradictions that are the bread and butter of cultural analysis; the other concerned with the nature of dominations under a colonial (or colonial/imperial) regime. Power, a key conceptual tool for both, functions differently under each condition. When Kroskirty suggests that these articles be understood in relation to Gramsci's distinction between (cultural) "hegemony" and "force," this is exactly what he is talking about.

In a bounded society, you can easily tell the difference between the two. What is it when all ideological systems are humming along smoothly? Hegemony. When the police in riot gear start beating people and National Guardsmen kill students in the streets? Force—and force precisely because the cultural consensus of the hegemonic bloc has broken down. The memory and the threat of force underpin and color the complex multiple struggles that produce any and all moments of hegemony. The threat of force holds particular weight in colonial situations; Indian people (in this case) have a long memory of the use of dominating force against them. It was force, in one form or another, that brought Indian peoples into proximity with the dominant hegemonic forms and tropes of American culture. So does the threat of force represent a qualitative difference for Indian people in relation to their place within a dominant hegemonic system? Perhaps not. Nor, perhaps, is there a qualitative difference for Indian people in the chicken-and-egg question surrounding the relation between force and hegemony. That is, do particular cultural formations—let's call them, for lack of a better word, expectations—enable the use of force and the enactment of violence? Or do such acts of violence produce, out of social and psychological processes, cultural forms?

This framing of the question is unproductive at best, because it implies clear causality among processes that are co-constitutive. Try to sense the ways that colonial and imperial force lives as a ghost upon the shoulder of all those engaged in complex, messy, creative cultural mediations, and the ways that cultural tropes and forms rest ghostlike upon the brows of soldiers, superintendents, teachers, editors, and politicians when those people exert various kinds and degrees of force. When, in *Indians in Unexpected Places*, I stipulated

that “I would like for you to think of expectations in terms of the colonial and imperial relations of power existing between Indian people and the United States,” I think these ghosts are what I had in mind.⁶ Different in their spectral manifestations, they are actually one and the same thing. To experience them that way is to understand viscerally the very real power of culture and the very nature of the culture of power.

LANGUAGE/GAMES

Taking these complex dynamics into the realm of language, the authors reveal ways in which the jostling that produces cultural power operates across multiple realms and registers. A language game may be among the best places to see the internal positioning taking place within Indian groups trying to set and control the pace and nature of change. Tradition, purity, Indian English—all these (often non-Indian) categories are part of indigenous discourse. The trope of the linguistic apology (“I’m sorry that I don’t speak my language”) is among the most familiar manifestations of these Indian language ideologies—and among the most vexed statements of identity and subjectivity. Not being a first-language speaker says as much about the accident of one’s birth as it does about oneself; yet, for many Native people, it has become a point of unpleasant public performance and a difficult negotiation for Native subjectivities.

At the same time, many of the articles also recognize the ways Indian people push against these language ideologies, which are, after all, part of the shared cultural world of Native and non-Native. In soap operas, poetry, and film, Indians engage the ideologies, mock them, unravel them, and question them. Perhaps nowhere is this questioning more deadly serious than in the case of the reengagement with *myaamia*, which understands the malice behind the “last [speaker] of the Mohicans” trope; the substantial difficulty of restoring and maintaining a sleeping language; and its place—important but not solely determinative—within the broader constellation of a multicultural, multisited Miami cultural restoration.

Language games may also be among the best places to see the hardening discourses of expectation—and the moments of dissent and possibility—among non-Indians who confront Indian linguistic practice. One might take a mild form of pleasure at the juxtaposition of Allen’s confused grammatical tunnel vision, the parade of critics who echo her ignorance, and what one imagines as the tart intelligence of Mildred Hart Shaw, a critic from Grand Junction, Colorado, who argued, with regard to Mitchell’s *Miracle Hill*, “Mrs. Allen has written a patronizing, school-teacherish, unperceptive introduction to Mitchell and his book. It does no credit to either.”⁷ The pleasure that ensues

is fleeting, however, and it is not so much concerned with the underdog critic Shaw stepping to Mitchell's defense as it is with the gaps in what seems to be a monolithic cultural formation. Shaw's words open up the same species of possibility visible in American Indian critical linguistic practices, which is a place that Debenport describes as existing between a fictional world of possibility—open but still culturally constrained—and the realities on the ground. If the species are the same, the animals occupying the category are not. Indian linguistic practice demonstrates the new possibilities that always characterize the creativity that emerges from the margins. Shaw's opening appears as something rather different, not a trope of possibility, but of—dare I say it?—anomaly, for it is quite clear that the weight pressing relentlessly down on the system is that of non-Indian language ideology and expectation.

I wrote *Indians in Unexpected Places* at a moment when my students seemed to have been handed two analytical concepts—bias and stereotype—and been allowed to apply them haphazardly. They would boldly proclaim that an author was biased or that a certain image or account was nothing more than a stereotype. Then they would stop and beam, with the sense that they had achieved something analytically. When I pushed them to go further, they struggled. Yet it became clear that they intuited something important. There was a connection between cultural forms—familiar and thus appealing, emotionally resonant and thus mistaken for truth—and the unpleasant histories of domination that they also hesitated to engage: slavery and black oppression, Indian conquest, gender inequality, anti-Asian mob violence, Mexican dispossession and labor control, white class prejudice, and regional and religious difference, among others. Expectation, anomaly, and unexpectedness aimed to create a kind of tool, a working vocabulary that could move them further into the complicated dynamics of culture and power. Peterson, Webster, Meek, Debenport, Leonard, and Philips have, to my great delight, used the tool as a jumping-off point to push much further into those dynamics. These articles continue the task of complicating the complications, revealing new dimensions in linguistic practice, and making an airtight case for a new subtlety in the use of language—not simply as a thing to be linked to culture crudely and deterministically but also as a distinct site for investigation and analysis on its own terms.

NOTES

1. Lisa Philips, "Unexpected Languages: Multilingualism and Contact in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century North America," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (2011): 19–41.
2. Ibid.

3. Greg Dening, *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theater on the Bounty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Among other efforts exemplifying different sectors of Michel Foucault's writing, consider Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978) and Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). Thomas Biolsi, though wide-ranging beyond a Foucauldian lens, has been known to make arguments indebted to Foucault. See Biolsi, *Organizing the Lakota: The Political Economy of the New Deal on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), esp. 7–33; and Biolsi, *Deadliest Enemies: Law and the Making of Race Relations on and off Rosebud Reservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), esp. 205–10.

4. For my own reading of colonialism as an analytical construct in relation to cultural history, see Deloria, "From Nation to Neighborhood: Land, Policy, Culture, Colonialism and Empire in U.S.-Indian Relations," in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, Future*, ed. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 343–82.

5. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

6. Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 11.

7. Mildred Hart Shaw, review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, by Blackhorse Mitchell, *Daily Sentinel*, Grand Junction, CO, October 15, 1967 (Blackhorse Mitchell Collection), 12.

