

Colonized Thinking vs. Indigenous Thinking

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Introduction

In a dream, I sat by a sweat fire. As the rocks in the fire heated, three men covered the sweat house with blankets and tarps. I gathered from their conversation that these three were neither American Indian nor of Indian descent. They were three middle-aged men who would self-identify as “white”. They couldn’t see me as I sat by the fire; I was only there to observe. Evidently, an aged traditional Indian spiritual helper had agreed to conduct a ceremony for these three. The tribal identity of the old ceremonialist is a mystery, and I have no idea what ceremony was to be conducted. All I know is, the ceremony was to be preceded with a sweat. The three men were to prepare the sweat fire, cover and prepare the sweat house and pour the first three rounds of the sweat for themselves. Then, the old ceremonialist was to come and pour the final round for them, after which the main ceremony would commence, for which the sweat was a necessary preparation.

So, these three white men put rocks in the sweat house to make it look like they’d been in there sweating, but they didn’t go in. Instead, they retired to the nearby dwelling house where they enjoyed a big meal together, laughing and joking the whole time. After they were stuffed with food, they came back out by the sweat house and threw water on themselves to make it appear they had been in the sweat house. Finally, the old ceremonialist, the spiritual helper arrived. Well, he said, are you ready for the final round of the sweat? I didn’t stay around to see what would happen; I could well imagine.

As mentioned before, the three men were not Indian, not by blood and not by culture. Apparently, they were seeking some sort of “Indian experience”, yet were unwilling to take it seriously. Perhaps bragging rights is what they were after.

In her essay entitled “‘Indians,’ Solipsisms, and Archetypal Holocausts” found in *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing* edited by Marijo Moore, Paula Gunn Allen reflects, “One writes, thinks, works, talks, hopes against hope that the horror of white-think will somehow be turned around, that white madness can be cured” (pp. 306-307). She goes on to qualify her hope by saying, “White is used here to denote a mind-set or system of mental processes rather than a racial or genetic term. There are many Caucasian people and communities who in the past and at present are as distant from ‘white-think’ as any traditional Native American.”

I was going to talk about and write an essay contrasting white thinking with indigenous thinking, but thought better of it in light of Paula Gunn Allen’s disclaimer. What many non-white people often think of as “white thinking”, in all its horror, is really colonized thinking. Colonizers are, after all, themselves colonized persons, and the very concept of “white” along with other concepts such as “black” and “Indian” are themselves products of colonization mentality or colonized thinking. Furthermore, there is no one, no matter what their

ancestry who is immune from colonized thinking, no one so isolated as to not have been, in some extent, infected.

Fragmentation and categorization are colonized tendencies. Working from an indigenous mindset, it is often difficult to categorize something into constituent parts, as one tends to see all things as interrelated or unified. However, for the purpose of this essay, I have attempted to break things down into categories, although, as the reader will see, the categories are interrelated and never mutually exclusive one of another. For instance, indigenous thinking will not allow for talking about land without talking about relationships, and one may not discuss either of these without talking about spirituality. Even so, this paper has seemingly separate categories for land, relationships and spirituality. So, does this mean this essay is being written for an audience of colonized thinkers? No. Few, if any thoroughly colonized thinkers would ever bother to read something like this. So, does this mean this essay is for an audience of indigenous thinkers? No. While fully indigenous thinkers may enjoy reading this essay, it doesn't stand to do them much good. No. This essay is written for an audience of those of us who are somewhere between these two ways of thinking and especially for those who are endeavoring, against all odds, to wake up in the midst of colonizing violence and to consciously move away from the direction of colonized thinking and toward the direction of indigenous thinking.

Respectfully I add the following disclaimer: Please do not think that I am attempting to speak for all indigenous people in this essay. I am not speaking for all indigenous people any more than I am speaking for all colonized people. I am simply speaking from the perspective of one observer somewhere in the middle. In this, I speak only for myself and with hope that my thinking is more indigenous and less colonized than it was seven, 13, 26 or 52 years ago.

As you begin reading through the chapters ahead, you may well ask, "Why does he call this an essay? It's a book." Well, let's just say it is an extended essay.