

WHICH CANOE ARE YOU IN? A VIEW FROM A FIRST NATIONS PERSON

This narrative discusses the meaning of "foreignness" from the perspective of an indigenous person. Issues of sovereignty and citizenship in Native Nations are discussed as they influence my decisions and actions as a social worker and educator. Compatible areas and conflicts between my professional and Lakota cultures are discussed.

By
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Centuries ago when the first Europeans came to the Americas, the indigenous people or people of the First Nations were watching them. Decisions had to be made about the new arrivals. Should they be greeted with friendship or hostility, chased away or allowed to remain? After generations of observations, the leaders made a decision: the newcomers would be allowed to stay, but their lives must always be separate from the First Nation's people. The lives and values of the newcomers were so vastly different from those of the indigenous people that it was clear that no one person could successfully live up to the standards and practices in both societies. This philosophy of parallel cultures was commemorated in the Two Row Wampum Belt which depicts two canoes traveling down the same river.

To travel the river successfully, you need to be in one canoe. Anyone who attempts to travel down the river with one foot in each canoe is headed for disaster and will inevitably end up in neither.

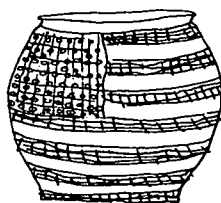
This story constitutes part of the teaching base of the Haudenosaunee, a confederacy of First Nations people who had some of the earliest contact with European settlers. The story tells us that you can be White or Indian but not both. While some researchers who conduct empirical studies of bicultural identity may see the world through a different lens, many people see a lot of truth in the story. What follows is my story of teaching social work from the Indian canoe. There was a time in my life when I tried to have a foot in each, but I have since learned that it is impossible to balance while standing in one canoe, much less two. Nevertheless, I do continue to reach across the water.

My story of "foreignness" and its implications for my work as a social work educator is a bit different from the stories of others. When most people think of foreigners, they tend to think of people that



immigrated to the United States from other places, not citizens of indigenous nations that have been displaced and/or surrounded by the United States. I have found that many people in the United States have sense of community, support, and cultural continuity. I discussed my dream and five-year plan of buying some land and beginning to build on my husband's reservation in spite of the difficult commute to get to work that this would mean. This dream is strong but I still find myself reaching out across the water toward the other canoe in an attempt to do it all. The five-year plan includes getting tenure at my university first, then feeling freer to move farther away from the school to the reservation.

Clearly, Indian people and Indian reservations do not exist in a vacuum. It is not realistic for most of us to live in complete isolation from the United States, nor is this neces-



sarily the desire of some Indians. However because Indian Nations continue to exist as sovereign entities, many of us still feel our primary (and sometimes exclusive) allegiance is to our own nations.

**Issues of displacement and cultural marginality:
Sometimes I fall in the water and try to dog-paddle.**

I live outside of a reservation and therefore within a state. I work for a state university but politically and culturally I am a foreigner in the United States. The land that I live in is filled with people from cultures different from my own. This takes on additional meaning when at one time the whole continent was populated with indigenous people. Now we are so outnumbered that many people are oblivious to our very existence.

Being on a Lakota reservation brings both strange and familiar feelings. A few years ago I was driving across the country at the time of the annual Oglala Pow Wow. I decided to stop and stay awhile. It felt right to be visiting this home where I had never lived. The dances and drum beat were familiar and comforting. The announcer kept the audience well-informed of the day's events, that is, those people who spoke Lakota were well-informed of the days events. From my perspective I was the only one in this world (that should have been my world) who did not understand the language. I speak only English, leaving me marginal in this, my own home. Perhaps I've managed to get in the canoe only to discover that everyone has a paddle but me.

Land is central to the culture, identity, spirituality, well-being, and survival of Indian people. Living where I do, far from traditional Lakota territo-

ries, makes it difficult to maintain my identity as a Lakota person. I, like many other urban Indians, find it necessary to travel "back home" periodically for renewal. Unlike many other spiritualities, most Indian traditional ceremonies cannot be transported to other regions. My traditions require that certain things be done in certain places and at certain times. There are seven places that are sacred to the Lakota people within our traditional territories, the most famous being the Black Hills. In order to maintain my own well-being and that of the Lakota people, I have now made a commitment to return "home" at least once a year.

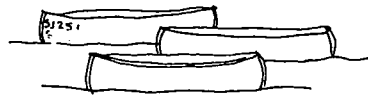
This year I was unable to return to South Dakota, which caused a severe spiritual and moral crisis. Long before the time appointed for my return, I made a commitment to do a presentation at a social work conference (a commitment prized quite highly in my school as important on the road to tenure). I had not attended the conference for the past two years because it conflicted with the time when I needed to go home. This year since the two commitments were in different weeks, I made plans to go to the conference. A long, drawn-out illness left me with little stamina. Up until the last minute, I convinced myself that I could do both, but this proved to be unrealistic. I never would have knowingly chosen to do a presentation at a social work conference over my spiritual and cultural commitment. Reaching out over the water toward the

other canoe, I ended up with a face full of water and a heart full of regrets. As a guideline for this narrative, I was asked to address the personal meaning of cultural marginality. Forced assimilation of Indian people has, in some cases, led to questions of identity and cultural marginality. Within my family there are people who have accepted the values of the dominant society and are reluctant to have anything to do with anything or anyone Indian. However, as a social worker I prefer to address issues from a strengths perspective rather than one of marginality. Looking at issues from a deficit perspective tends to reinforce weaknesses rather than strengths. In spite of the genocide that has been actively practiced against Indian people, we still exist as distinct cultures and nations. Resilience has led to survival against all odds.

My grandparents grew up at a time when they saw very little future in being Indian. My grandfather was born nine months after the massacre at Wounded Knee, often cited as the last gasp of Indian resistance against the encroachment of the United States. Assimilation was seen as the only alternative to extinction. My grandparents preferred not to talk or think about being Indian.

A few years ago I was visiting my grandmother. In her 90s she was still able to live in her own home with the assistance of a home care attendant.

My first day there the attendant commented several times on my phenotypical features and how "Indian" I looked. My grandmother kept silent. The attendant seemed to need some explanation, and since none was forthcoming, began to tell us some convoluted story with religious overtones of how American Indians had traveled to many continents in ancient times, which explains why some people look Indian. My grandmother preferred not to disclose her ethnic identity and concealed it whenever possible. For her it must have felt like a mat-



ter of survival. I respect her feelings but I feel differently. I am proud of my culture and my heritage (perhaps in part because I live in a time when this is relatively safe). My writing, my speeches, my community commitments, and the way in which I present myself all proclaim my pride in the resilience of Indian people. There was a time when our languages, religions, and cultures had to go underground rather than be destroyed. Some things were lost and many people experienced painful conflicts over what it meant to be an Indian, but we have survived and our cultures continue.

During times when I lived outside of an Indian com-

munity, I tended to feel more marginal. The discomfort that I feel when surrounded by people speaking my language, which I have difficulty understanding, is far outweighed by the sense of community and belonging. Each time I return to Lakota territory, I understand a little bit more of our traditions, culture, and language, and who I am as a Lakota person. Most American Indian traditions tell of people who have been lost and will return. As a returning person the journey is difficult, but there are many who await me with open arms. Community in this sense is much more than a geographical entity. A sense of the group as a source of identity is a prominent feature of many Indian cultures. In community I belong. Any sense of past marginality evaporates.

Assaults on sovereignty: They're trying to sink the canoe!

This is a time when indigenous nations are facing increasing assaults from states and from the federal government. Attacks on sovereignty take place as outsiders seek resources on Native land. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court held that the state of New York has a right to tax the sale of cigarettes and gasoline to non-Indians on reservations. This is in direct opposition to rights guaranteed under treaties. It limits the sovereignty of the nations within New York's boundaries by forc-

ing them to collect someone else's tax. When the state attempted to enforce this decision, it greatly damaged the primary economic base of these nations, further hindered self-sufficiency, and led to violent confrontations between state police and indigenous people on Indian land.

This is not the first time that the inherent sovereignty of Native Nations has been under attack. The 1950s was known as the "termination" era. Termination was a legal process by which the U.S. federal government took steps to end its responsibilities to many Indian nations such as the Klamath and the Menominee. The process legally dissolved the existence of Indian Nations in the eyes of the United States. After termination the people of those nations were left with no treaty rights, no health benefits, no social benefits, no reservation lands. After termination the federal government completely denied the Indian status of thousands of people. With this step federal policy went beyond ignoring indigenous nations as represented by the Indian canoe. This policy set out to destroy the canoe all together so that its existence would no longer be an issue. Although the termination era took place before my birth, I still feel the wounds of this attack on Indian people. I am left with the fear that although new policies may have different names, such attacks will come again.

Termination was promoted as a progressive policy. It was justified by the argument

that Indian people had "advanced" to the stage of being ready to participate fully in the United States. Markers of this readiness to assimilate can include involvement in the political processes of the United States. After all, if everyone is in the U.S. canoe, there is no need for an Indian canoe.

According to the federal government, keeping an Indian identity was seen as holding on to poverty and a wide variety of social problems. I see this very differently. In reality, termination is closer to extinction than to an end to social problems. If our canoe is destroyed, some may successfully make it to the United States canoe. Many others will be lost in the process. Some Native Nations such as the Menominee were able to successfully advocate for a reversal of the legal termination process. Others are currently fighting for federal recognition.

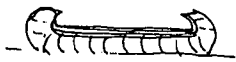
Cultural identity and professional issues: How to keep balanced in my canoe while surviving in social work academia.

My culture and sense of who I am as an Indian person shapes my values, beliefs, and behaviors. It shapes these both as a human being and as a social worker/educator. My ideas about respect and responsibility guide my interactions with clients and students. I do not lecture at my students; rather, I guide them and facilitate discussions based on my own learning. I believe that they are capable of taking responsibility for their own learning. This is a value

from my culture based on beliefs about respect, responsibility, and non-interference with the choices of others. Clearly, however, the Lakota do not have a monopoly on these values. My education at Antioch College was a major force in shaping my philosophy of teaching and learning. At times it is difficult to sort out whether my style as a social work practitioner and educator is more influenced by my culture of origin (Lakota) or my professional culture (social work). I suspect that both play significant roles.

Although my professional and cultural values are sometimes compatible, this is not always the case. Perhaps the most noticeable area of conflict between my culture of origin and my professional culture comes around political involvement as an extension of advocacy. There is no question in my mind that advocacy is one of the core values and traditions in social work. I have found myself in the role of advocate many times. In this day and age, more social workers are attempting to influence political processes and are seeking political office. My advocacy does not and cannot extend into this area.

As an indigenous person with strong values around sovereignty, I believe that it is not my role to paddle the U.S. canoe. My political participation in the outside world would undermine the internal roles that indigenous people have to play within their own societies. Paddling the U.S. canoe would take me out of the Indian canoe, leaving mine adrift or at least without my in-



put. While not all Indian people share this view, many do. I point out that although I live right across the river from Canada and the political processes within Canada do have implications for my life and well-being, I do not vote there either.

In contrast, for me it is possible to advocate for the needs and rights of Indian people by trying to influence outside governments through external processes rather than internal processes such as voting. This type of external advocacy is less likely to conflict with sovereignty principles. For example, Indians of many Nations have had ongoing rallies, protests, marches, and demonstrations in an attempt to prevent exploitation of Native resources by non-Natives at Big Mountain in Arizona, and to prevent the destruction of the Cree homeland by Hydro Quebec in Canada. Many non-Natives have also joined in these important struggles.

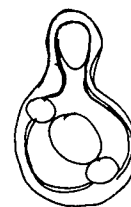
**Solidarity and support:
Joining hands across the
water.**

Social workers and other interested individuals often ask

me what they can do to help Indian people. I encourage advocacy around state and federal policies. Indian Nations do not exist in a vacuum. Federal and state policies do affect Indian people, often in a negative way. Political advocacy is an important role that can be played by those who empathize with Indian people. Non-Natives can act as watchdogs against paternalistic intrusions by federal or state governments into indigenous programs, institutions, and societies. During the recent conflicts between the state of New York and First Nations' people mentioned earlier, many non-Indians showed their support by participating in rallies, making speeches, and pressuring their political officials. Notable support came from religious coalitions and the Nation of Islam who stood in solidarity with demonstrators against the state-imposed tax. To paraphrase one social worker, "There is a debt which can never be paid. Those of us who have come to this country from elsewhere will always be in your debt and we should all do what we can to show our support for your rights."

Educators have a role to play in teaching their students about the unique position of indigenous people in the United States. For general background on sovereignty and Indian issues, educators may want to become familiar with books such as *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, edited by M. A. Jaimes (1992). Although we share a legacy of oppression with other

groups of color, because of our history and our indigenous status, some of our issues around assimilation and citizenship are unique. *Social Services in the Ethnic Community* (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995) compares and contrasts how different ethnic populations, including indigenous people, were treated in the early history of social work. Additionally, educators in the helping professions can help students to understand how the unique position and history of indigenous people have led to the creation of specific federal policies and agencies designed to meet their needs. One of the most frequently discussed policies is the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 which attempted to remedy the alienation of vast



numbers of Indian children from their families and communities. Many articles in social work journals examine the Act itself and the sovereignty issues around it. Finally, it is strongly recommended that educators use the power of stories to teach about Indian issues. People from many indigenous traditions use stories as a primary teaching tool. Many books, short stories, and poems describe the experiences of Indian people. In my classes I assign

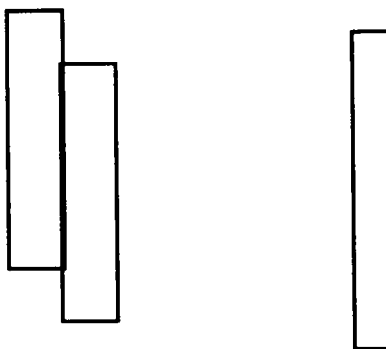
students to find a fictional work by an Indian author, read it, critique it, and identify its implications for social work. I also take time in class to read the poem *Being Indian is...* by the late Ruben Snake. It is a brief poem filled with joy, sorrow, and humor. It is a wonderful springboard for talking about the multifaceted experience of being Indian.

Conclusion

In my experience, issues of citizenship and of foreignness are not only ignored but often do not even occur to other people in the United States. Helping professionals, educators and other interested people can begin to understand issues of citizenship of indigenous people by listening with an open mind and an open heart. Indian people who feel strongly about sovereignty and who choose not to be U.S. citizens should be taken seriously rather than brushed off and dismissed as out of touch. It is not that we are seeking to go "back to the blanket" or make unrealistic attempts to reclaim our past. Sovereignty is an issue that has been here since non-indigenous people first came to the Americas. We existed as members of independent, sovereign nations then. We exist as members of independent sovereign nations now. The least that others can do is to respect that fact.

My life is a journey which has taken me from the canoe that my grandparents

placed me in to the canoe of my ancestors. For me, at this time, the canoes are close to each other. I reach out to the United States canoe in my roles as a social worker and a social work educator but as I find myself choosing the Indian canoe more and more, this type of reaching out increasingly upsets my balance. Part of the reaching out that I do now, especially around struggles and requirements of



social work academia, I do in the knowledge that a time will come when I will be required to put more of my energy into paddling the canoe of my own people. As I age, my community responsibilities grow. To be balanced and centered requires looking in, not reaching out. I have made a choice that not all Indian people make, nor is it the right choice for everyone. I have chosen and continue to choose the canoe that is right for me. □

REFERENCES

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- Jaimes, M. A. (ed.). (1992). *The state of Native America: Genocide, colonization, and resistance*. Boston: South End Press.
- Snake, R. (unknown). *Being Indian is...* (This poem was probably written in the 1970s and has been widely circulated at pow wows, conferences, etc. It is unknown if this poem has been officially published.)

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