

Scott Richard Lyons

## Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?

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After years of colonization, oppression, and resistance, American Indians are making clear what they want from the heretofore compromised technology of writing. Rhetorical sovereignty, a people's control of its meaning, is found in sites legal, aesthetic, and pedagogical, and composition studies can both contribute to and learn from this work.

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*Now, brothers and sisters . . . the white man has his ways. Oh gracious me, he has his ways. He talks about the Word. He talks through it and around it. He builds upon it with syllables, with prefixes and suffixes and hyphens and accents. He adds and subtracts and divides and multiplies the Word. And in all of this he subtracts the Truth. And, brothers and sisters, you have come to live in the white man's world. Now the white man deals in words, and he deals easily, with grace and sleight of hand. And in his presence, here on his own ground, you are as children, mere babes in the woods.*

—N. Scott Momaday (*House*, 93–94)

*A student asked, "Can Essential Nature be destroyed?"  
Coyote said, "Yes, it can."  
The student asked, "How can Essential Nature be destroyed?"  
Coyote said, "With an eraser."*

—Robert Aitken

CCC 51:3 / FEBRUARY 2000

In *My People the Sioux*, Luther Standing Bear recounts the moment when he and other children arrived at the Carlisle Indian School and received for the first time the European implements of writing. “Although we were yet wearing our Indian clothes,” Standing Bear writes, “we were marched into a school room, where we were each given a pencil and slate. We were seated at single desks. We soon discovered that the pencils made marks on the slate” (*Sioux* 136). Pulling their blankets over their heads to conceal both slate and the marks they would make upon them, a child’s act of modesty, the children’s first impulse was to draw scenes from their recently departed home life—“a man on a pony chasing a buffalo, or a boy shooting birds in a tree, or it might be one of our Indian games”—and when finished, “we dropped our blankets down on the seat and marched up to the teacher with our slates to show what we had drawn” (*Sioux* 136). Picture these children withdrawing into their blankets with a curious new technology, concealing their texts from each other and the teacher until just the right moment, then emerging from their blankets proud and eager to share the fruits of their labor. They were, at least until this point, the same children, and the marks they made were earnest representations of their lives. Shortly thereafter, however, this same technology would be used to change them:

One day when we came to school there was a lot of writing on one of the blackboards. We did not know what it meant, but our interpreter came into the room and said, ‘Do you see all these marks on the blackboard? Well, each word is a white man’s name. They are going to give each one of you one of these names by which you will hereafter be known.’ None of the names were read or explained to us, so of course we did not know the sound or meaning of any of them. (*Sioux* 136–37)

These arbitrary, meaningless names were selected by students who were given a pointer by the teacher; the chosen name was then written on cloth and sewed on the back of each student’s shirt. Standing Bear recalls how the first boy to choose a name looked back at the others “as much as to say . . . ‘Is it right for me to take a white man’s name?’” (*Sioux* 137). But Standing Bear himself “took the pointer and acted as if I were about to touch an enemy” (*Sioux* 137), counting coup on the text, so to speak, and probably eliciting laughter in support of his mock bravery from the other kids. “Soon we all had names of white men sewed on our backs” (*Sioux* 137).

That laughter, which is not in Standing Bear’s book but remains my guess, my desire, would nonetheless be short-lived, as is known by anyone familiar with the boarding school story. As David Wallace Adams tells it in *Education for Extinction*, this tale “constitutes yet another deplorable episode in the long and tragic history of Indian-

white relations”—specifically, the development of education designed to promote “the eradication of all traces of tribal identity and culture, replacing them with the commonplace knowledge and values of white civilization” (336, 335). This forced replacement of one identity for another, a cultural violence enabled in part through acts of physical violence, was in so many ways located at the scene of writing. More horrific than most scenes of writing, however, the boarding school stands out as the ultimate symbol of white domination, even genocide, through assimilation in the American Indian experience. And although Standing Bear and others would recall multiple forms of Indian resistance, from torching schools to running away to counting coup on the Western text, the duplicitous interrelationships between writing, violence, and colonization developed during the nineteenth-century—not only in the boarding schools but at the signings of hundreds of treaties, most of which were dishonored by whites—would set into motion a persistent distrust of the written word in English, one that resonates in homes and schools and courts of law still today. If our respect for the Word remains resolute, our faith in the written word is compromised at best.

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What do Indians want from writing? Certainly something other than the names of white men sewn to our backs. And for its part, resistance to assimilation through the acts of writing should entail something more than counting coup on the text (or for that matter, torching the school). I suggest that our highest hopes for literacy at this point rest upon a vision we might name *rhetorical sovereignty*. Sovereignty, of course, has long been a contested term in Native discourse, and its shifting meanings over time attest to an ongoing struggle between Americans and the hundreds of Indian nations that occupy this land. Our claims to sovereignty entail much more than arguments for tax-exempt status or the right to build and operate casinos; they are nothing less than our attempt to survive and flourish as a people. Sovereignty is the guiding story in our pursuit of self-determination, the general strategy by which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization: our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self-respect. For indigenous people everywhere, sovereignty is an ideal principle, the beacon by which we seek the paths to agency and power and community renewal. Attacks on sovereignty are attacks on what it enables us to pursue; the pursuit of sovereignty is an attempt to revive not our past, but our possibilities. Rhetorical sovereignty is the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of

public discourse. Placing the scene of writing squarely back into the particular contingency of the Indian rhetorical situation, rhetorical sovereignty requires of writing teachers more than a renewed commitment to listening and learning; it also requires a radical rethinking of how and what we teach as the written word at all levels of schooling, from preschool to graduate curricula and beyond. In what follows, I hope to sketch out some preliminary notes toward the praxis that is rhetorical sovereignty. I begin with a discussion of the concept of sovereignty, followed by a dialogue between the fields of composition and rhetoric and Native American studies, concluding with some very general recommendations for expanding our canons and curricula. My argument is motivated in part by my sense of being haunted by that little boy's backward glance to those other Indian children: *Is it right for me to take a white man's name?*

### **Sovereignty is (also) rhetorical**

Sovereignty, as I generally use and understand the term, denotes the right of a people to conduct its own affairs, in its own place, in its own way. The concept of sovereignty originated in feudal Europe, and as a term it arrived to the English language by way of France; *souverain* signified a ruler accountable to no one save himself or God (Duchacek 47). Early modern European monarchs employed the language of sovereignty to secure their grip on state power in the face of a threatening nobility and papacy. A declaration of one's right to rule, a monarch's claim to sovereignty "stood as a ringing assertion of absolute political authority at home, one that could imply designs on territory abroad" (Fowler and Bunck

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5). As modern nations and states underwent their various forms of development, the concept was consistently deployed to address not only domestic authority at home but a state's relative independence from *and among* other states; thus, sovereignty came to mean something systemic and relational. A sovereign's power was generally a force understood in relation to other sovereigns in the emerging international scene; hence, "a sovereign was to respect the sovereignty of its peers" (Fowler and Bunck 6). As political institutions continued to develop under modernity, the meanings of sovereignty changed with them, signifying such matters as the right to make and enforce laws, notions of political legitimacy and international recognition, and national self-determination. While the meanings of sovereignty have shifted and continue to shift over time, the concept has nonetheless carried with it a sense of locatable and recognizable power. In fact, the location of power has depended upon the crucial act of recognition—and vice versa.

From the early moments of first contact on this continent, the construction of Indian and non-Indian senses of sovereignty was a contested and contradictory process. It

was also a rhetorical one. Although there is no possible way to describe its many and complicated logics in necessary detail here, we can see that for at least two centuries following Columbus, “European states were compelled to recognize and engage Indian nations as political actors in their diplomatic activities” (Berman 128). They did this in large part through making treaties with Indian nations, a process that created a relationship between groups of “an international rather than internal character,” even in sites of severe colonizing activity (Berman 129). This acknowledged sense of Indian national sovereignty was so strong among European states that it actually became a means of legitimizing European claims to new world resources; a territorial dispute between the English and the Dutch, say, might be settled by one side producing a treaty with the sovereign nation who actually owned the land (Berman 132). After the American revolution, the United States maintained the practice of treaty-making with Indian nations begun by European powers, and “from the beginning of its political existence, recognized a measure of autonomy in the Indian bands and tribes” (Prucha, *Treaties* 2). During the years 1778–1868, the U.S. signed and ratified some 367 treaties with Indian nations, all of which presumed a sense of sovereignty on the part of Indian groups. About two-thirds of those treaties were land deals, and as Prucha points out, “cession of Indian lands . . . was an indication of Indian sovereignty over those lands, and the recognition by the United States of Indian ownership to the lands remaining strengthened the concept” (*Treaties* 4). You can’t give up what you don’t own, after all; nor can you buy what’s already yours.

However, the Americans would gradually assume a dominant stance in Indian-white relations, leading to an erosion of Native sovereignty that Prucha credits to overwhelming American military strength, growing Indian economic dependence on white goods, and treaty provisions that left stipulations to be carried out by Congress (Prucha, *Treaties* 6–7). After the American revolution, it wasn’t long before the nation-to-nation stance Indians and their interlocutors had operated from was simultaneously attacked and affirmed in a couple of landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases concerning the Cherokee of Georgia facing removal in the early nineteenth century. In *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831), Chief Justice John Marshall’s famous pronouncement of the Cherokees as a “domestic dependent nation” constituted the United States’ first major, unilateral reinterpretation of Indian sovereignty, one further tinkered with a year later by the same court in *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832). In the former opinion, Marshall deemed the Cherokees limited in their claim to sovereignty, seeing them as a nation not-quite-foreign, but suggested nonetheless that the Cherokees still formed “a distinct political society, separated by others, capable of managing its own affairs and governing itself” (Prucha, *Documents* 58). This somewhat glaring contradiction was explained in the latter decision, where Marshall opined that “Indian nations had always

been considered as distinct, independent political communities, retaining their original natural rights, as the undisputed possessors of the soil, from time immemorial, *with the single exception* imposed by irresistible power” (Prucha, *Documents* 60; emphasis mine). In other words, while recognizing Indian sovereignty in terms we can fairly describe as eternal and absolute, the Supreme Court’s decisions on the Cherokee cases ultimately caved in to what would become a persistent, uniquely American, and wholly imperialist notion of recognition-from-above. The United States could limit Cherokee sovereignty simply because it could, and it could because it is the United States. American exceptionalism won the day, thanks to its “irresistible power,” and while U.S. plenary power wouldn’t become fully articulated in a legal sense until *United States v. Kagama* in 1886, it found its rhetorical groundwork laid solidly in the Cherokee cases of the 1830s.

In a sense, these cases exemplify what we might call rhetorical imperialism: the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of debate. These terms are often definitional—that is, they *identify* the parties discussed by describing them in certain ways. Take, for example, Marshall’s rather self-reflective analysis of the language of sovereignty in his *Worcester v. Georgia* opinion:

... ‘treaty’ and ‘nation’ are words of our own language, selected in our diplomatic and legislative proceedings . . . having each a definite and well-understood meaning. We have applied them to Indians, as we have applied them to the other nations of the earth. They are applied to all in the same sense. (Prucha, *Documents* 60)

In short, Indians are defined here as fellow nations requiring treaties. Yet in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, Marshall wrote that “the term foreign nation” *wasn’t* quite applicable to Indian nations, suggesting instead that the Cherokee Nation’s “relation to the United States resembles that of a ward to his guardian.” This was because Indians—“savages” newly arrived on “civilization’s” fresh path—were “in a state of pupilage” (Prucha, *Documents* 59). More than an agonistic legal contest over

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sovereign rights, the language of this decision shows Indian people being completely redefined by their interlocutors: a ward or pupil—that is, a child—is quite a different animal than a fellow nation in the community of sovereigns. As the exercise of rhetorical imperialism, Marshall’s metaphors effectively paved the way for the United States to assume a position of political *paternalism* over Indian nations that has thrived up to this very day—chalk one up for the “Great White Father.” The lesson here seems obvious: namely, he who sets the terms sets the limits. And likewise the rewriting of Indian sovereignty would continue over time. As Prucha points out, the word “tribe” increasingly came to replace “nation” in treaties, sub-

stituting one highly ideological European word for another, and with the Abolition of Treaty-Making Act of 1871, a powerful little rider tacked on to an Indian appropriations bill that formally ended the practice of treaty-making, “treaties” henceforth came to be called “agreements” by the authoring Americans (Prucha, *Treaties* 4, 211–13). From “sovereign” to “ward,” from “nation” to “tribe,” and from “treaty” to “agreement,” the erosion of Indian national sovereignty can be credited in part to a rhetorically imperialist use of writing by white powers, and from that point on, much of the discourse on tribal sovereignty has nit-picked, albeit powerfully, around terms and definitions.

None of this stopped Indian exercises of sovereignty—it just threw things into different modes and sites of contest, for instance, that of language and representation. Not to downplay the tremendous cost to Indian people these struggles for sovereignty have entailed, but I want to point out that the dominant stance achieved by the Americans must continue to be seen as merely that—dominant, not omnipotent—which is far from saying all things are said and done. Indian nations still possess, and are still recognized to possess, varying and constantly shifting degrees of sovereignty. While hegemonic versions of the American Indian story implying the obverse continue to be told in schools, scholarship, and popular culture—generally in the past tense—discourses of resistance and renewal have never ceased in Indian country, and these marginalized narratives of the continuing struggle for Indian sovereignty are making themselves more and more visible in public representations and talk. It’s worthwhile to note how so much of this struggle, from treaties to court cases to the growing popularity of Native American literature—has taken place at what we might call the colonized scene of writing: a site of contact-zone rhetoric in its fullest sense. One way of approaching this site is to find in American legal, political, and cultural written discourses recurrent, yet ambivalent, assaults on Native sovereignty answered by recurrent, yet subordinate, defenses and redefinitions of the same by Indians. These textual exchanges are eminently rhetorical: arguments motivated by highly ideological confluences and intertwinings of motives, beliefs, and assumptions that do not lend themselves to a sense of consensually-derived conclusions. One reason for this is certainly due to power imbalances between whites and Indians, but another seems owing to truly salient differences in cultural understandings of what it means to be political human beings. That is, I want to suggest that the rhetorics of sovereignty advanced by both Indian and non-Indian people often claim to be talking about the same thing, when actually they differ considerably.

For example, for Western powers after the Enlightenment, the meaning of sovereignty became contingent upon freshly-formed conceptions of the modern nation-state and new bourgeois ideologies of the individual. The former was a legal-political understanding of the right to popular self-governance freed from the shackles of older forms of monarchical sovereignty, the latter a new subjectivity enjoyed and defended

by the bourgeoisie. Both were generated from a desire to develop and protect the idea of private property. In this context, for a thinker like Kant, sovereignty became essentially procedural, the exercise of reason and public critique generated by the bourgeoisie who as “the people” construct the nation-state through the act of making coercive laws, and subsequently as “sovereign” coerce through them as a *nation* and are coerced by them as *individuals* (“Metaphysics” 142). Sovereignty for Kant was a largely technical process of communicative rationality ultimately designed to benefit and control solitary monads; hence, the nation-state became something of an instrument. Sovereignty rested primarily with the “public,” itself constituted by the communicating mass of wholly “private” individuals acting out of self-interest (Kant, “Enlightenment” 55–7; see also Habermas). The dialectic of private and public constituted the business of the nation-state, even while resting upon a series of exclusions (for example, of gender, race, and class) that belied its utopian claims to equality, as public sphere theorists have demonstrated (see Fraser; Ryan). But ultimately, for the young United States of the Enlightenment, sovereignty was exercised through the communicative procedures developed and maintained by individuals who, through reason, would form the public and run the nation-state (Eley).

By contrast, Indians who entered into treaties as nations are better understood as representing themselves as a *people*:

The idea of the people is primarily a religious conception, and with most American Indian tribes it begins somewhere in the primordial mists. In that time the people were gathered together but did not yet see themselves as a distinct people. A holy man had a dream or a vision; quasi-mythological figures of cosmic importance revealed themselves, or in some other manner the people were instructed. They were given ceremonies and rituals that enabled them to find their place on the continent. (Deloria and Lytle 8)

A people is a group of human beings united together by history, language, culture, or some combination therein—a community joined in union for a common purpose: the survival and flourishing of the people itself. It has always been from an understanding of themselves as a people that Indian groups have constructed themselves as a nation. In *The Power of Identity*, Manuel Castells defines nations as “cultural communes constructed in people’s minds and collective memory by the sharing of history and political projects,” adding a political dimension to a sense of peoplehood (51). In his analysis, nations, with or without states, tend to be organized around the sensual cultural material of peoples—for example, language—and the First Nations were and are no exception (Castells 31). “Indians had a good idea of nationhood,” Deloria and Lytle write, defining the exercise of nationhood as “decision-making that is free and uninhibited within the community” and suggesting it was always conducted out of regard for the survival and flourishing of the people (8, 13). In that sense, the making of po-



litical decisions by Indian people hasn't been the work of a nation-state so much as that of a *nation-people*. The sovereignty of individuals and the privileging of procedure are less important in the logic of a nation-people, which takes as its supreme charge the sovereignty of the group through a privileging of its traditions and culture and continuity.

One example of a nation-people might be found in the system of Cherokee towns prior to their formal and essentially forced incorporation as a nation-state in the early nineteenth century, itself a desperate political maneuver in the face of impending removal. Some sixty in all, traditional Cherokee towns in Georgia were generally decentralized but loosely linked through language and kinship, each village ultimately retaining its own sense of independence (Champagne 25). As both people and nation, "the Cherokees found unity in an overarching principle that governed their behavior in both domestic and foreign affairs." Namely, "Cherokees believed that human beings had the responsibility for maintaining cosmic order by respecting categories and maintaining boundaries" (Perdue 56). These categories and boundaries were often derived from mythological understandings of their culture but were also open to democratic contest in council houses (Champagne 29). This was no nation of individuals, nor one reducible to procedure; rather, the Cherokees found their national identity and interests in the concept of the people. Reason, deployed regularly and at will in council-house decision making, did not militate against their understandings of themselves as a group; nor was reason contingent upon a sense of privacy. Rather, reason and rationality were deployed always with an idealistic eye toward the betterment of the people, including but not limited to the individuals which constituted it, through the practices of tradition and culture.

Another, more cosmopolitan example of a nation-people is the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois League, which was actually a consciously constructed confederation of *different* peoples based upon the principle of peaceful coexistence. As Onandaga leader and professor Oren Lyons tells it, "Haudenosaunee political organization demonstrated that a form of participatory democracy was possible on a fairly large geographic scale," and what's striking in his account is how democratic procedures were constructed into a "primordial" myth that spoke to and of multiple cultures (32). Linked by the story of the Peacemaker and the practice of respectful communication, the Haudenosaunee were—and remain—a *multicultural* nation-people (34–42). "Since the beginning of our memory," Lyons writes, "this distinctiveness has been seen as a foundation for mutual respect; and we have therefore always honored the fundamental right of peoples and

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their societies to be different” (42). Here, too, the traditions of the people coexisted with the exercise of a communal, communicative rationality:

Indian decision-making processes at the local level required the free input of information and advice for these processes to work at all. Any proposal brought to the Haudenosaunee was carried to each of the nations, where it was discussed either in clan or general meetings; the sentiments of the nation were then carried by the principal chiefs to the confederate council . . . and the chiefs had the authority to negotiate details of a proposed agreement according to their own judgment and in line with political reality. (Lyons 32)

Thus conceived, Haudenosaunee sovereignty is probably best understood as the right of a people to exist and enter into agreements with other peoples for the sole purpose of promoting, not suppressing, local cultures and traditions, even while united by a common political project—in this case, the noble goal of peace between peoples.

In the context of the colonized scene of writing, the distinction between a nation-state and a nation-people might get at the root of why Indians and non-Indians tend to view things like treaties so differently even today. “In almost every treaty,” Deloria and Lytle write, “the concern of the Indians was the preservation of the people”: that is, the successful perpetuation of life, land rights, community, and cultural practice (8). Sovereignty in this regard is concerned not only with political procedures or individual rights but with a whole way of life. Non-Indian reductions of Indian claims to sovereignty as arguments for “self-governance”—that is, for a degree of local financial and political control modeled after western governmental systems—obscures this holistic people-oriented emphasis. “Self-government is not an Indian idea,” write Deloria and Lytle. “It originates in the minds of non-Indians who have reduced the traditional ways to dust” (15). Self-governance is certainly the work of a state but not necessarily that of a people; a people requires something more. However, while self-governance alone may not constitute the whole part and parcel of sovereignty, it nonetheless remains a crucial component. “I believe that the future of our nations is singularly dependent upon our ability to self-govern,” writes Robert B. Porter. “If we can do this, then all of our other problems—the loss of language and culture, the need for economic stability, and the preservation of tribal sovereignty—can then be addressed and, hopefully, resolved” (73). What we might need, then, is an understanding of the twin pillars of sovereignty: the power to self-govern and the affirmation of peoplehood. For without self-governance, especially in America, the people fragment into a destructive and chaotic individualism, and without the people, there is no one left to govern and simply nothing left to protect.

And so it has been with both self-governance and the people in mind that Indians have been advancing new rhetorics of sovereignty—both to themselves and to outside powers—and some of these have found their way into the academy. In *We Talk, You Listen*, Deloria explicitly addresses the concept in a chapter entitled “Power, Sovereignty, and Freedom.” Suggesting that “few members of racial minority groups have realized

that inherent in their peculiar experience on this continent is hidden the basic recognition of their power and sovereignty,” Deloria argues for action at the group level to replace legal claims for self-determination “since power cannot be given and accepted” (115); rather, it must be first asserted and then recognized. As Robert Warrior points out, Deloria’s is a “process-centered definition of sovereignty,” one contingent upon the renewal of groups at the community level (91). From this reading of Deloria, Warrior has advanced his own concept of “intellectual sovereignty,” a process devoted to community renewal through the paying of attention to the American Indian intellectual tradition, one he lays out in the form of a materialist history (1–3). While I question the end game of a project promoting Indian intellectuals studying Indian intellectuals, Warrior’s work still has much to offer in a mainstream academic culture still obsessed with canonicity. Warrior has been praised for this work by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who finds most other critics, including some Natives, afraid to take on the nationalist implications of sovereignty in their critical theory and work (90–91). Cook-Lynn also criticizes mainstream multiculturalism, which she argues “has not and will not cast much light on the centuries-long struggle for sovereignty faced by the people” because it remains “in conflict with the concept of American Indian sovereignty, since it emphasizes matters of spirituality and culture” divorced from national recognition (91). Mainstream multiculturalism is not sovereignty *per se* because it abstracts its sense of culture from the people and from the land, and while it may indeed affirm the rightful and creative existence of Indian cultures and peoples among others, it tends not to discuss that other pillar of sovereignty: self-government. Mainstream multiculturalism may focus on the *people* but typically not the *nation* and thus isn’t necessarily the practice or honoring of Indian sovereignty.

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In all three of these thinkers, the rhetoric of sovereignty takes on a decidedly nationalistic cast, but while they all advocate focusing on action at the community level, none of them can adequately be described as purely separatist. Rather, in explicit opposition to this, Warrior calls for Indians to “withdraw without becoming separatists, being willing to reach out for the contradictions within our experience and open ourselves to the pain and the joy of others” (124). Rather than representing an enclave, sovereignty here is the ability to assert oneself renewed—in the presence of others. It is a people’s right to rebuild, its demand to exist and present its gifts to the world. Also key to these thinkers’ rhetorics of sovereignty is an adamant refusal to disassociate culture, identity, and power from the *land*, and it is precisely this commitment to place that makes the concept of rhetorical sovereignty an empowering device for all forms of community. While most Indians have a special relationship with the land in the form of an actual land base (reservations), this relationship is made truly meaningful by a

consistent cultural refusal to interact with that land as private property or purely exploitable resource. Land, culture, and community are inseparable in Indian country, which might explain Native resistance to such policies as the Dawes Allotment Act of a century ago, which tried to transform Indians into bourgeois whites by making them property-holding farmers. This cultural resistance has consistently been made in objection to the way such policies divide Indian communities and disrupt traditional culture with radically individualist ideologies, and whenever I see community activists of whatever stripe—Black, Hmong, working-class, etc.—making arguments on behalf of “our community” in the face of apparently naked economic self-interest, I think those, too, are claims to sovereignty made by different groups. But most important, as voices of the people, scholars like Deloria, Warrior, and Cook-Lynn are asserting themselves as members of sovereign Indian nations, deploying power and seeking recognition at the colonized scene of writing.

I have gone on (and perhaps on and on) about the concept of sovereignty because I think it is not well understood by most non-Indian scholars and teachers. I also think the idea has something to offer the discourses of multiculturalism and critical race theory, or to anyone who sides with the oppressed or who works for community renewal, because of its applicability to the many contested sites (and actual places) of power in multiple senses: legal, cultural, intellectual, material, and so on. Sovereignty is a concept that has a history of contest, shifting meanings, and culturally-specific rhetorics. A reclamation of sovereignty by any group remains, as Deloria argues above, a recognition of that group’s power—a recognition made by both self and other. It is not something “new” or, worse, something “given” by dominant groups, and for the sake of the people, we might all do well to contemplate what that might mean.

### **Rhetorical sovereignty at the C & R ranch**

All of which brings me back to where I started: what do American Indians want from writing? At stake in this discussion are the peoples defined by the writing itself; thus one important tenet of rhetorical sovereignty would be to allow Indians to have some say about the nature of their textual representations. The best way to honor this creed would be to have Indian people themselves do the writing, but it might also be recognized that some representations are better than others, whoever the author. On that note, a quick perusal through the composition and rhetoric literature of the past few years shows a growing interest in American Indians and a general concern for including Native knowledges and voices in classrooms and curricula that should be commended. But some of this work hinders rhetorical sovereignty by presenting readers with Indian stereotypes, cultural appropriation, and a virtual absence of discourse on sovereignty and the status of Indian nations—that is, with a kind of rhetorical imperialism. Sometimes this writing has been

done with all the best of intentions, but on that note it might be good to recall that Chief Justice Marshall, the original architect of limited sovereignty for Indians, was generally considered a very pro-Indian thinker in his day—to Indian-hating President Andrew Jackson’s continual dismay—even as Marshall was busy composing the foundational documents for American imperialist control over tribes. So without getting into where good intentions sometimes lead, let me say for now that some of our most prominent work on Indians is not yet part of the solution.

Take, for example, the recent publication of George Kennedy’s *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction*. Kennedy, who has taught me so much in his books about classical Greek and Roman rhetoric and who I continue to honor as a great scholar of those subjects, has now seen fit to locate rhetoric in nature and to place its history on a developmental, essentially evolutionary, model, the entire scheme of which seems to be based upon Western stereotypes of the Other. Divided into two sections, the oral and the literate, the study begins with an investigation of the rhetoric of animals, including bird calls, and works its way “up” through the language of “oral” indigenous people, then through the literacy of Egyptians, Chinese, Indians (from India) to its grand finale in the civilizations of Greece and Rome. In that order, African Americans are not even mentioned, which Kermit Campbell might have criticized more strongly in his mainly positive review of the “pioneering” work (174). It’s worth noting that this evolutionary study actually works backwards in time; most of Kennedy’s examples of “North American Indian Rhetoric” (Chapter 5), for example, are taken from the nineteenth century, a particularly devastating yet rhetorically profuse time for most Native people. Why Kennedy didn’t acknowledge the overwhelming proliferation of *writing* by Native people during that century—not the least of which can be found in the many tribal newspapers of those years, for instance, in the bilingual *Cherokee Phoenix* of the 1820s—probably owes itself to the deeply ingrained stereotypes of Indians as 1) essentially oral creatures, and 2) existing only in an imagined savage past. Both of those persistent stereotypes are examined together in *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing, and Representation in North American Indian Texts* by David Murray, who points out that in communicative exchanges between Indians and whites, “the cultural translation is all one-way, and the penalty to the subordinate group for not adapting to the demands of the dominant group is to cease to exist” (6). Thus, the logic Kennedy employs in his study might lead some to the conclusion that a writing Indian is no Indian at all.

In addition to the effect of making questions of sovereignty a moot point, Kennedy’s erasure of real Indians serves other agendas as well. Finding in “early human language” a “connecting link” between the rhetoric of animals and that of oral (but not literate) humans, Kennedy has basically provided a theory of the Missing Link located within the speech of the people (2). The result is a quiet assumption that Indians are

something less than human, if something more than animals. I don't know how else to take his comparison of red deer stags and "Eskimos" (by which I think he means Inuit):

In a previous chapter I described the rhetoric of red deer stags in seeking rights to mate with females—vocal encounters, stalking, and fights with their horns if one animal does not give way. A similar sequence has characterized Eskimo quarrels over women: insults, threatening gestures, and fights in the form of butting or wrestling contests. (77)

And here I thought all that butting and wrestling was something we did for fun. What Inuit *women* might have to say about this characterization of their dating life notwithstanding, I have to ask if this is really where we want to go in the study of comparative rhetorics. Cultural evolutionism, a nineteenth-century phenomenon associated with early anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan (who studied "the vanishing Indian"), has long been used to justify an ideology of savagery-barbarism-civilization, which in turn has always operated to the detriment of Indian peoples (see Berkhofer, 49–61). To locate Indian rhetoric at an early point on the Great Chain of Speaking not only ignores *this* kind of speech for a claim about *that* kind, the results of which may be dehumanizing, but by implication also suggests that today's Indian peoples are probably not real anymore. I suppose Kennedy wanted to find oral eloquence and the like among Indian cultures, but through his desire, and his acceptance and perpetuation of stereotypes, he seems to have lost sight of actually existing indigenous people and has uncharacteristically misplaced rhetoric.

The oral-literate binary—which I apparently (and mistakenly) had thought dismantled by now—also lurks ominously in Bruce Ballenger's "Methods of Memory: On Native American Storytelling." Ballenger appropriates what he calls an "Indian way" of remembering" to make sense of his own life and writing. "methods" he locates in Native oral traditions (790; 792–3). Of course, his access to this oral tradition is enabled completely through the reading of Native *writers*, but never mind: the point of the article, it seems to me, is to grab and make use of what even Ballenger admits does not belong to him with the

**To locate Indian rhetoric at an early point on the Great Chain of Speaking . . . suggests that today's Indian peoples are probably not real anymore.**

express purpose of "creat[ing] the 'whole story' of myself" (795). In other words, the "Indian way" serves as a kind of supplemental technology to aid and abet the construction of Ballenger's self as a sovereign, unique

individual: a highly literate white man with all the benefits and privileges therein. "It is always the 'I'—not the 'we'—that concerns me most," Ballenger writes, adding that what distinguishes him from real Indians is his motivation for "self-expression" (795). Not unlike Tonto, then, the Indian is there for the taking as a kind of helper and teacher in the white man's quest to Know Thyself. Since Ballenger's essay on Native American story-

telling isn't about Native Americans at all, but rather about what Ballenger apparently feels free to *take* from Natives, we must find in this writing the logic of cultural imperialism. Wendy Rose has argued that by "appropriating indigenous cultures and distorting them for its own purposes . . . the dominant society can neatly eclipse every aspect of contemporary native reality, from land rights to issues of religious freedom" (404). Indeed, Ballenger's own expansive familiarity with Indian writers

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did not lead him to discuss any of the issues facing the people today (and which are often represented in the novels he reads); on the contrary, he seems to accept things as they are. One particularly troubling moment for me was his discussion of place in Native literature; after making the solid claim that Indians "tend to see the land as something with a presence"—fair enough—Ballenger goes on to recall his times on the shores of Lake Michigan, formerly and in some cases still Anishinabe country, remembered by him "with a kind of reverence" as, in his word, "unpeopled" (798). The actual history of peopling and unpeopling on those shores would be a worthwhile thing to investigate.

Ballenger's essay is perhaps a sensitive one to criticize because it is interspersed with some painful recollections of his childhood. But I have some painful recollections of my own, as many Native people do. Right now I'm thinking of my two young Ojibwe cousins who committed suicide in the same year—one in his early twenties, the other barely approaching his teens—two deaths that might be attributed to a kind of self-hatred experienced by many Indian youths today who find themselves trapped in colonial wreckage: poverty, violence, a racist dominant culture that hates and excludes them. Consider the findings of a recent study on American Indian crime produced by the Justice Department which found that "American Indians are victims of violent crime at a rate of more than double that of the rest of the population" ("American"). In seven out of ten of those episodes, the offender is non-Indian. The report also stated that the number of American Indians per capita in state and federal prisons is some thirty-eight percent above the national average; the rate in local jails is four times the national average. The arrest rate for alcohol-related offenses is more than twice the rate for the total population ("American"). Or consider the fact that "Native people endure the poorest quality of life in this country," because of which "1,000 more Native men, women, and children die each year than would be expected if they were living in the same conditions as white America." (This, remember, out of a total population of only 1.5 million.) "If these same conditions existed throughout the total population of our country, 150,000 more American people would die *each year*" (Charleston 17; emphasis in original). Nobody ever wants to appropriate stuff like that.

Rhetorical sovereignty, however, compels us to face it. It is always the "we"—not the "I"—that concerns me most, and my particular motivation is the pursuit of social

justice. Or let's simply call it sanity in an age of unchecked American imperialism, rampant consumer capitalism on an unprecedented global scale, haphazard and unsustainable depletions and abuses of natural resources, naked European and American aggression around the globe, racism, sexism, homophobia, and the ever-widening gap between rich and poor in America and everywhere. In contexts such as these, there are very good reasons to fight for indigenous rights. Indigenous people, who in some senses are now forming a global movement (seen, for example, in growing international indigenous support for the Zapatista movement in Chiapas), may constitute the world's most adamant refusal of current expansions of global capitalism and imperialism that plague so many and benefit so few. As groups like Greenpeace have argued:

Native people's homelands encompass many of the planet's last tracts of wilderness—ecosystems that shelter millions of endangered species, buffer the global climate, and regulate hydrological cycles. . . . Even without considering questions of human rights and the intrinsic value of cultures, indigenous survival is a matter of crucial importance. We in the world's dominant cultures simply can not sustain the Earth's ecological health without the help of the world's endangered cultures. (qtd. in Owens 233)

However, the people themselves are among those endangered species. Brazil alone has lost something like 90 tribes this century, and over half of all remaining 6,000 indigenous languages worldwide will become extinct in the next (Owens 233). Unless the people can prevent that from happening.

Composition and rhetoric certainly isn't going to stop it, although we can do some things that might have us play a more meaningful role—which brings me back yet again to the question: what do Indians want from writing? So far, I hope to have identified a few things Indians generally do *not* want from writing: stereotypes, cultural appropriation, exclusion, ignorance, irrelevance, rhetorical imperialism. The people want sovereignty, and in the context of the colonized scene of writing, rhetorical sovereignty. As the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in the pursuit of self-determination, rhetorical sovereignty requires above all the presence of an Indian voice, speaking or writing in an ongoing context of colonization and setting at least some of the terms of debate. Ideally, that voice would often employ a Native language. "Language, in particular, helps to decolonize the mind," writes the Hawaiian nationalist Haunani-Kay Trask. "Thinking in one's own cultural referents leads to conceptualizing in one's own world view which, in turn, leads to disagreement with and eventual opposition to the dominant ideology" (54). The crucial subject of Native language in literacy research cannot be taken up here, except perhaps to say *nindožhibii'igemin*. But while it's hard to predict what that Indian voice would say in our many and varied classrooms—most of them Indian-free, some located at tribal colleges, others constituting dynamic contact-zones of their own—I can point to schol-



arly work in a couple of sites that might help us orient our commitment to rhetorical sovereignty and imagine new practices.

One location of rhetorical sovereignty that should be of interest to rhetoricians is the Tribal Law and Government Center, based at the University of Kansas Law School and directed by Seneca legal scholar (and former Attorney General of the Seneca Nation) Robert B. Porter. Focusing its energies on the study and development of tribal law (which is not the same thing as federal Indian law but rather the law of sovereign Indian nations), the Center sponsors the Indian Law Institute each summer for tribal officials, a yearly conference, and a specialization in tribal law within the law program. Of particular interest for our purposes, the Center has been sponsoring annual rearguments of some of the most powerful federal legal decisions in the history of Indian sovereignty, for example, *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* and *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock*. Under the auspices of the “Supreme Court of the American Indian Nations,” these retrials are conducted by a distinguished array of Indian and non-Indian lawyers and judges, and the briefs they produce are published alongside the original opinions and briefs and are available for study and teaching (Ayana, Guhin, Yazzie). Critical pedagogues, contact-zone theorists, and post/anti-colonial rhetoricians might take note of these powerful Indian countersentences to colonialism; after all, these reargued indigenous responses to legal and political history constitute an ongoing and dynamic practice of rhetorical sovereignty, and we could teach them.

Another key site of rhetorical sovereignty is the report produced by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force (INARTF), “Toward True Native Education: A Treaty of 1992,” which was commissioned by the Department of Education in 1990. INARTF was a 14-member committee established by U.S. Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos and directed by Choctaw education professor, G. Mike Charleston. With two exceptions it was an Indian committee, and the document they produced is a classic example of the exercise of rhetorical sovereignty. First, as its title suggests, the report announces itself as a *treaty*, one designed to put an end to the “secret war” (also referred to as a “cold war”) waged against indigenous peoples (Charleston 15–16). Distinguishing the metaphor of war from other more dominant ones in liberal and educational discourse—for example, the idea of an Indian “plight” and the notion of a “tug-of-war” between cultures—the report justifies the war metaphor on two accounts. First, this “war is over the continued existence of tribal societies of American Indians and Alaska Natives”; that is, at issue isn’t so much the curing of Indian ills or celebration of diversity but rather a recognition of Indian sovereignty. Second, war is *stopped* by treaties between mutually recognized sovereign entities (16). The “Treaty of 1992,” then, offers an educational theory inseparable from a recognition of sovereignty and a plea to stop the violence as well. Arguing that “school has become the weapon of choice for non-Native societies” to attack tribal sovereignty in all of its manifestations, the report distinguishes three types of Indian education. *Pseudo Native education* is “a process that diligently attempts to teach Native

students the standard American curriculum needed to assimilate into American society” (19–20). *Quasi Native education* is “an education that sincerely attempts to make American education more culturally relevant and supportive of Native students and Native communities” through the teaching of Native cultural trinkets like “legends, history, and Native words” (27). *True Native education* rejects any “division between school climate and culture and . . . community climate and culture,” replacing hierarchical models of curricula and pedagogy with a concerted community effort, envisioned by the committee as a circle (40, 31). What true Native education calls for in the final analysis is nothing less than the formal institutionalization of rhetorical sovereignty.

**We should be teaching the treaties and federal Indian laws as rhetorical texts themselves.**

This rethought education remains insistent upon dialogue, land, and the continuation of the people, so we should all consider the implications of another metaphor in the INARTF report: the “new Ghost Dance.” Invoking the first Ghost Dance movement of a century ago, a prophetic religious movement praying for the return of Indian power (answered by whites with the brutal slaughter of Chief Big Foot’s band of Lakota at the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890), the Treaty of 1992 insists that the “new Ghost Dance calls Native *and* non-Native people to join together and take action.” For non-Native participants, the new Ghost Dance “requires a major change in their behaviors, attitudes, and values”; for Natives, much of the work will be decolonization of the mind and self (28). Educators “need to teach the reasons for the hundreds of treaties and agreements between the various tribes and the United States” and promote “a basic understanding, respect, and appreciation for American Indian and Alaskan Native cultures” to all students (29). Altogether, this approach would work for “a revival of tribal life and the return of harmony among all relations of creation” (28). I can think of no better document than this to help us begin the work of rhetorical sovereignty in our field and start answering the question of what Indians want from writing. The metaphors of the INARTF report—treaty, war, Ghost Dance—are carefully chosen signifiers that aim to cast into full relief the fault lines of Indian-white interaction in America, and the report should be read as an extended hand, not a fist, in the very serious pursuit of a people’s sovereignty. How will we respond?

I suggest we begin by prioritizing the study of American Indian rhetoric—and the rhetoric of the Indian—in our graduate curricula and writing programs, focusing on the history of both secret and not-so-secret wars in the contact-zone. We should be teaching the treaties and federal Indian laws as rhetorical texts themselves, situating our work within both historical and contemporary contexts. We should also study the ideologies of Indianness and Manifest Destiny that have governed it all. No student should encounter a Native American text without having learned something about Indian peoples’ historical and ongoing struggles for sovereignty, and teachers of Native stu-

dents in particular should create a space for those kinds of discussions. This work would continually examine one's relationship to Indian sovereignty, as well as expand our canons and current knowledge in ways that would hopefully make them more relevant to and reflective of actual populations on this land. On that note, I also think this site should be read and taught not in separation from other groups, but alongside the histories, rhetorics, and struggles of African-Americans and other "racial" or ethnic groups, women, sexual minorities, the disabled, and still others, locating history and writing instruction in the powerful context of American rhetorical struggle.

Ideally, this work should focus on local and community levels in hopes of lending support to the work already being done there. "There" is sometimes difficult to locate, I realize, but every university and school exists in a place, on a land, with a history and a community of struggle: every place has its peoples. For example, the Cincinnati-Tristate region where I went to graduate school, and which sometimes struck me as the most Indian-free zone I had ever seen, actually boasts a Native population of 2,365 people ("American"). Who are they, what is their history, and what are they facing now? Some of them are certainly homeless, and so their history might be read in the context of a current struggle. In that place, on that land, members of the local arts community have proposed moving the Drop-Inn Center, the area's largest homeless shelter, away from a gentrifying neighborhood so arts patrons won't have to look at the poor and despondent on their way to the concert (Knight 1). Considering geographer Neil Smith's contention that gentrifying inner-city neighborhoods like this one (Over-the-Rhine) constitute "the new frontier"—the site of increasing white "settlement" to the displacement of the "savages" who live there—it's perfectly reasonable to conclude that the Cincinnati controversy is nothing less than another debate over *removal*. What could be more teachable than this in the pursuit of sovereignty?

Ethnographers and service-learning theorists have already begun the valuable work of theorizing community-based pedagogy, but my hopes are also pinned on classroom theories oriented toward the formation of *publics*. Susan Wells has provided our best thinking so far toward these ends, arguing for and theorizing writing instruction geared toward "public literate action" (334). Wells would rethink publicly-oriented writing classrooms in four different ways:

**Sovereignty has always been on some level a public pursuit of recognition.**

1) as a version of the public sphere, 2) as a site for the study of public discourse, 3) as a place to produce student writing that might actually enter public space, and 4) as a location for the examination of how academic discourses and disciplinary knowledges intervene in the public (338–39). Read alongside the INARTF recommendations in the context of rhetorical sovereignty, her proposals sound vital to me, for sovereignty has always been on some level a public pursuit of recognition. A focus on American Indian

publics is especially appropriate now in the fresh wake of two rather substantial Indian victories in the public, both of which have everything to do with literacy and rhetoric, reading and writing and arguing. The first is the April 1999 Supreme Court upholding of the 1837 Chippewa Treaty in Minnesota that guarantees my own people the right to hunt and fish on ceded lands (*Minnesota v. Mille Lacs Band*). The second is the federal Trademark Trial and Appeal Board's disrecognition of the Washington Redskins trademark, a move that could cost that organization millions of dollars in lost (because unprotected) revenues and, hence, provides a financial incentive to change the name (Rich 3). These victories were won by Native people who learned how to fight battles in both court and the culture-at-large, who knew how to read and write the legal system, interrogate and challenge cultural semiotics, generate public opinion, form publics, and create solidarity with others. That behind each of these victories were contests over the acts of reading and writing is obvious; what needs to be underscored is that both are also victories of rhetorical sovereignty. Both initiatives arose from the grassroots, each in their own way fought over questions of land and identity, and the ultimate outcome of both was an honoring of "a whole way of life," another productive step in the perpetuation of the people. Shouldn't the teaching of (American Indian) rhetoric be geared toward these kinds of outcomes?

***Ningiigid, nindinawe: I speak, I speak like the people with whom I live.***

That's what I want from writing. My particular desire asks a lot, I know, from teachers and students and readers and writers and texts. It wants to read history through a contemporary lens and continually beckon forth the public. It asks everyone, especially teachers, to think carefully about their positions, locations, and alignments: the differences and connections between sovereignty and solidarity. It wishes to reinscribe the land and reread the people; it cries for revision. However, without some turn in the current assault on affirmative action, I suspect all talk on rhetorical sovereignty will likely happen away from the university. Luther Standing Bear, writing in the 1930s, knew as much in his push for rhetorical sovereignty in American schools. "The Indian," he wrote, "should become his own historian, giving his account of the race—fewer and fewer accounts of the wars and more of statecraft, legends, languages, oratory, and philosophical conceptions" (*Eagle* 254). What did Standing Bear, formerly that little boy who once counted coup on the classroom text, want from writing? "No longer should the Indian be dehumanized in order to make material for lurid and cheap fiction to embellish street-stands," he wrote. "Rather, a fair and correct history of the native American should be incorporated in the curriculum of the public school" (*Eagle* 254).

*Is it right for me to take a white man's name?* The answer, it would seem, has always been no. But that refusal has never meant giving up or going away; rather, a No over there can sometimes enable Yes over here. The ability to speak both—indeed, to speak

at all—is the right and the theory and the practice and the poetry of rhetorical sovereignty. *Ningiigid, nindinawe*: I speak, I speak like the people with whom I live.

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### Scott Richard Lyons

Scott Richard Lyons (Ojibwe/Mdewakanton Dakota) teaches communication at Leech Lake Tribal College on his home reservation in northern Minnesota. He is also a Ph.D. candidate at Miami University of Ohio, currently completing a dissertation on American Indian rhetoric.