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## ***Transethnic Anthropologism: Comparative Ethnic Studies at Berkeley***

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Gerald Vizenor

The American Revolution, that celebrated war of independence, was not the *first*, but the *second* revolution on this continent; these comparative chronicles of sovereignty are historical contradictions and the everlasting cause of resistance in a constitutional democracy.

The *first* revolution was native, a war of independence from the rush of missionaries and colonial domination, and that war was launched almost a century before the *second* historical revolution of the thirteen colonies and the formation of the United States.

The Southwestern native communities initiated the *first* united revolution on August 10, 1680, and defeated the Spanish Kingdom of New Mexico. "This dramatic episode represented one of the bloodiest defeats ever experienced by Spain in her overseas empire," Marc Simmons wrote in the introduction to *The Pueblo Revolt*. "And, as historians are accustomed to say, it was the first successful battle for independence fought against a European colonial power in what was to become the United States" (v).

The unities of that native revolution, and others since then, are the foundational histories of survivance in this nation; whatever the course of sovereignties, native resistance, then and now, has been contrived too many times in the extreme as either incertitude, necromancy, or mere victimery.

The converse histories of dominance rather than native survivance have been secured in museums and at universities by several generations of academic masters. The natives were studied and established as abstruse cultures and then embodied in motion pictures as the simulated burdens of civilization. These adversities became moral grievances and caused a turn in the notions, courses, and literary canons at universities, but the treacheries and dominance of *anthropolo-*

*gism*, the obsessive studies of natives by social scientists, have not been overturned in comparative ethnic studies.

"Anthropology's alliance with the forces of oppression is neither a simple or recent one," wrote Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other*. "The relationships between anthropology and its object are inevitably political; production of knowledge occurs in a public forum of intergroup, interclass, and international relations. Among the historical conditions under which our discipline emerged and which affected its growth and differentiation were the rise of capitalism and its colonialist-imperialist expansion into the very societies which became the target of our inquiries" (143-44). The dominance of that alliance is evermore political in ethnic studies.

The Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley, inherited, in a curious sense, a new narrative enactment of the agonistic abstraction of two historical revolutions; three centuries later the misnomers and contradictions of independence are redoubled in an academic union of learned natives and newcomers, socialists, separatists, cultural essentialists, narcissists, anarchists, and even those shriven with aesthetic victimery.

The Ethnic Studies Department was constituted at the time of civil rights activism, the peace movement, ethnic and cultural nominalism, and radical turns of racial consciousness in the late '60s. At that moment of social transformation this new academic enterprise embraced four ethnic programs in an uncommon political and cultural union, and the appearance of internal congruence soon became a national model of reciprocal ideologies and racial identities; the enterprise has been a crucial advance in conservative academic conventions. Since then the academic missions and contradictions have widened in a new comparative, or *transethnic*, graduate studies program. Comparative practices are never certain, as the ethnic narratives, subjects, objects, theories, and methodologies are seldom comparable; the discrepancies coalesce as ethnic similarities, or *transethnic* redactions, rather than closer studies of dissimilarities. Comparative and *transethnic* theories, in this sense, transcend the significance and diversities of native cultures.

African American Studies was the first of the four programs to separate and reorganize two decades ago as an independent department. Ethnic Studies, in an associable action, voted recently to recast the other programs as independent departments. Asian Studies, Native American Studies, and Chicano Studies would have disconnected with an association in a fourth department of comparative ethnic studies if the university administration had supported the proposal. The new scheme was seen by some as separatism, a clever partition of ideologies, historical revisions, and the end of ethnic studies.

Native American Studies resisted any division of the department;

however, if separation was inevitable, the program faculty voted to choose other academic associations. The native resistance was a notable reversal of the political sentiments of separatism in the international shadow of ethnic nationalism. This was not a revolution, but a resistance that would later prove to be a wiser academic course than ethnic separatism. Meanwhile, the other programs persisted with the reorganization proposal, and some administrators and faculty members maligned the resistance and counteractions of Native American Studies.

In one generation the faculty of the department had established a new discipline and an imperative academic presence on the campus; the outstanding research, instruction, and publications of the faculty have influenced the perceptions, ideas, and interests of thousands of students. The department was assured, and the faculty, without a doubt, was the most eminent in the world of ethnic studies. Why then was there such a rush to separatism in the department? Could it have been that ethnic unities were mere poses and political expediencies?

Native American Studies counteracted with a proposal to establish a new academic union and commensurate mission with American Studies. The action was denied, as were the other proposals for independent departments, but this new association would have been named the Center for the Study of the Americas.

American Studies was not a theoretical contrivance but the courtesies of diverse academic interests on campus; however, some faculty were very concerned that this new association would displace the established acceptance of Ethnic Studies. That substitution, however, had already been announced in the reorganization proposal by the faculty of Asian and Chicano Studies.

American Studies was established to ascertain various research interests and methods "drawn from a variety of disciplines" and "recognizes that political, cultural and economic patterns do not stop at national borders."

Native American Studies has a similar eclectic mission that considers the situational interpretations of resistance, traditional oral performances, critical studies of histories, literatures, autobiographies, and other narratives in translation; the mission convenes diverse faculty research on comparative governments, tribal sovereignty, reservations, education, environmental studies, crossblood identities, and third gender tribal communities.

Native American Studies is comparative by reason of cultural differences not ethnic similarities. This eclectic representation of diverse histories has been reduced by *anthropologism* and those who use natives as *transethnic* scapegoats. "Anthropology as the study of cultural difference can be productive only if difference is drawn into

the arena of dialectical contradiction" (144), wrote Johannes Fabian.

The Center for the Study of the Americas would have maintained these academic interests and research as a common mission of American Studies and Native American Studies in the Division of Undergraduate and Interdisciplinary Studies.

Native American cultures and communities are the very foundational histories of the Americas. The presence and resistance of these cultures is an immeasurable native survivance over the dominance of colonial discoveries; therefore, the basic academic mission of the program is inherent and sovereign in the sense of the *first* revolution on this continent and the conceivable emendations in a constitutional democracy.

"We affirm the right of individual faculty members in the Native American Studies Program to pursue their research interests outside of the existing structure of the Ethnic Studies Department," wrote the departmental chair, Margarita Melville. "Just as strongly, however, we affirm the importance of protecting the curricular integrity of the Ethnic Studies undergraduate major, which was designed with the course contributions of Native American Studies faculty in mind, and in accordance with the principle of cross-ethnic cooperation that informed the creation of the [Ethnic Studies Department] and its survival after the departure of African American Studies."

Melville, an anthropologist, held a faculty position in the Chicano Studies Program. She did not mention at the time that Native American Studies had only three permanent faculty members, compared to twice that number in Chicano Studies. Native American Studies lost faculty positions while there was an increase of faculty in Chicano Studies.

Vice Chancellor Carol Christ and the chair of the Academic Senate at the University of California, Berkeley, reported that there was "strong sentiment against the separate departmental status" among the various committees that studied the proposed reorganization. Ethnic Studies would be weakened by a separation and "it would have detrimental intellectual consequences. There are fixed costs to running a department. The smaller the department, the more time individual faculty spend meeting these costs." Native American Studies programs and departments were established at many colleges and universities in the past two decades. However, few of these new programs survived the racial politics, the criticism of academic research and publications, or the race to *transethnic* studies. The Ethnic Studies Department, once more on the rebound, has become a national graduate center of comparative or *transethnic* studies, a distinction that could be a new measure of dominance. For instance, the notions of aesthetic borderlands would erase the presence, resistance, and traditional histories of

native communities. The *first* native revolution that overturned the cross and crown of colonialism would be twice silenced in *transethnic* borderlands. The burdens of discoveries, simulations, and *anthropologism* have roused an academic resistance, the essence of native survivance.

*Transethnic* studies are travels with the other on ethnic borderlands; travel, to be sure, in the literature of *anthropologism* and dominance. "Travel was once a means of being elsewhere, or of being nowhere," wrote Jean Baudrillard in *The Transparency of Evil*. "Today it is the only way we have of feeling that we are somewhere. At home, surrounded by information, by screens, I am no longer anywhere, but rather everywhere in the world at once, in the midst of a universal banality—a banality that is the same in every country" (151). The notion of a banal borderland as "somewhere" is the transposition of native territories and resistance.

The representations of native cultural differences are obscured as the other in *anthropologism* and *transethnic* comparative studies; the natural reason and contradictions of the native are transposed, but as the simulations of the exotic other are redoubled in museums and motion pictures, the natives and their narratives are erased on *transethnic* borderlands at universities.

In the "symbolic universe there is no place for the otherness of difference. Neither animals, nor gods, nor the dead, are *other*. All are caught up in the same cycle. If you are outside the cycle, however, you do not even exist," wrote Jean Baudrillard. "Everyone *wants* their other. Everyone has an imperious need to put the other at their mercy, along with a heady urge to make the other last as long as possible so as to savour him" (159). And this "other is the locus of what escapes us, and the way whereby we escape from ourselves. The other here is not the locus of desire, nor the locus of alienation, but the locus of vertiginousness, of eclipse, of appearing and disappearing" (159). The other "is what allows me not to repeat myself for ever" (159).

Baudrillard argues that the simulation of the other is a "Great Game. . . . Racial otherness survives everything: conquest, racialism, extermination, the virus of difference, the psychodrama of alienation. On the one hand, the Other is always-already dead; on the other hand, the Other is indestructible" (146). The native otherness of multiculturalism and aesthetic victimery survives *anthropologism* and *transethnic* studies.

The rise of *anthropologism* is a banal encore of the other; the episodes of the other in the ethnic simulations of multiculturalism are *transethnic* revisions of native resistance and the *first* revolution on this continent. The causes of ethnic separatism and *transethnic* studies are contradictions; the basic theoretical maneuvers are not resistance but a

mere academic presence. Whatever were the academic burdens of departments founded on the politics of racial resistance are now the banal virtues of multiculturalism.

Perhaps, in a literary sense, an ethnic presence in *transethnic* studies is an unmeant comedy; not a tragedy, but a faux comedy of the ethnic clerisy and their incessant desire for academic recognition, compensation, and salvation at the university.

"Tragedies end badly," wrote George Steiner in *The Death of Tragedy*. "The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This again is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy. . . . Tragedy is irreparable. It cannot lead to just and material compensation for past suffering" (8).

Comedy seems to be derived from tragedy, a sublime contradiction. Comedy, even the faux comedies of native trickster stories, is the credence of native survivance in literature. The trickster is nowhere when the stories are told at universities. Tragedy is dominance and victimery.

"Tragedy is the form that promises us a happy ending" (36), wrote Walter Kerr in *Tragedy and Comedy*. "Comedy is not a relief, it is the rest of the bitter truth, a holy impropriety. . . . Why should tragedy have more of a future than comedy? And why should comedy be happy enough without one?" (28, 80). The natural reason is that the dialectical contradiction of native survivance is more comic than tragic prudence. Comparative studies and *transethnic* comedies have no need for a future of tragic victimery.

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