

An Activist Posing as an Academic?

JEFF J. CORNTASSEL

A few years ago, while interviewing for a tenure-track position at a large, public institution in the Midwest, I was informed that several faculty members suspected me of being “an activist posing as an academic.” When I asked for more clarification, some faculty members explained that my research lacked “objectivity.” Based on subsequent conversations I had during the interview process, I deduced that their ideal academic was someone who applied reductionist, social scientific methodologies to parochial, data-driven research questions.

Apparently as a Tsalagi (Cherokee) scholar, my interdisciplinary, applied research threatened the “white” privilege and values of these self-appointed guardians of the political science discipline.¹ I never understood how approaching questions of political mobilization and human rights as a Tsalagi scholar could be deemed so threatening to the cohesiveness of an entire field. I also failed to appreciate such a dichotomized worldview—you are either an academic or an activist, but you clearly cannot be both. Such narrow, binary thinking gives the illusion that scholarship and activism are mutually exclusive. If I were to play anthropologist to the academics who opposed my interview (as they appear to have done with me during the interview process), I would carefully document their ethnocentric belief systems, myths of academic freedom, individualistic/self-absorbed cultural practices, passive-aggressive mannerisms in refusing to engage in any discussion regarding my research, and a generalized fear of original ideas.²

While I initially found the label of “activist posing as an academic” personally offensive, I now take pride in it, knowing that my dedication to Tsalagi people and Indigenous communities did not conveniently fit

into a Western conceptualization of “objectivity.” I am also proud that these guardians of disciplinary turf so clearly recognized the *applied* nature of my research and community outreach. By refusing to apologize for being a Tsalagi professor, I practiced the academic freedom that these scholars lauded publicly but suppressed privately.

Not surprisingly, I never received a job offer from the institution where I interviewed. Fortunately, I already had a tenure-track position with the political science department at a large, public university in the southeastern United States, which I will refer to as Yonega University (YU). In the course of my five years of experience at YU, I found that stereotypes of the Indian “activist,” “spiritual” Indian, and “Noble Savage” were still prevalent at these institutions of “higher learning.” I was constantly working to debunk these stereotypes while being held up to unrealistic expectations. On the one hand, as an Indigenous professor I was somehow expected to represent the interests of all Indigenous peoples in the United States and speak on behalf of some 4.1 million Indigenous peoples at committee meetings, lectures, and so forth—despite constantly informing disappointed faculty and students that I can only speak for myself. On the other hand, my views were denounced when I voiced perspectives that were contrary to prevailing university norms of white privilege—in those instances, I was considered out of line with other Indigenous views on the issue and inadequate as a “representative” for all Indigenous peoples. As eminent Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. writes: “The more we try to be ourselves, the more we are forced to defend what we have never been.”³

My experiences at YU made me realize that I did not aspire to live in a world where my work would be read exclusively by other academics (which seemed rather incestuous to me) and where my work with Indigenous communities might be perceived as a distraction from the “publish or perish” mentality. Following the philosophy of noted Cherokee anthropologist Robert K. Thomas, I am a Tsalagi first and a trained political scientist second.⁴ I want my life to reflect my attempt to walk the way of *wi-gaduwaga* based on relations to kinfolk, homelands/holy places, histories, language, and ceremonial life.⁵ As the lives of Henrietta Mann (Cheyenne), Robert K. Thomas (Cherokee Nation), Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), and others demonstrate, Indigenous professors can be *both* activists for our people as well as accomplished academics.

By writing about my experiences at YU, I hope these stories will benefit other students and faculty members who may have confronted or will

confront similar people and situations. While Indigenous peoples can create significant cultural, social, and intellectual spaces within the university system, it is important to remember that we still operate within Eurocentric university contexts where racism and sexism have been institutionalized and these entities are increasingly wedded to corporate interests. Given this institutional context, the Cherokee adage of “judge situations, not people” seems appropriate. As always, I can only speak for myself and my own experiences in these matters.

DANCES WITH EGOS (AND MULTICULTURAL FELLOWS)

A Tsalagi saying, “Live in a longer ‘now’—learn your history and culture and understand it is what you are now,” gets to the heart of my philosophy regarding diversity. For me, the real value of “cross-cultural” education is in promoting understanding and respect for diverse cultural perspectives and worldviews as societal and university strengths rather than allowing these views to be trivialized as obligatory or different. As Laguna poet and novelist Leslie Marmon Silko has stated, “We cannot have progress in society as long as some groups remain marginalized.”⁶ Therefore, for me, diversity is a collective and individual process of learning to live in a longer “now” both globally and locally.

A Kiowa Apache/Lakota friend of mine relayed a much different theory regarding university diversity programs. She contended that “multicultural programs” were really geared toward assuaging the guilt of white people and that the responsibility of educating the target audience fell disproportionately on people of color, who were already grossly underrepresented in these institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, diversity workshops taught white students the appropriate language that could be used to further their own careers at the expense of men and women of color. At first I balked at such a cynical approach to diversity, secretly hoping that she was wrong. The more I participated in diversity workshops at the university and community levels at YU, however, the more I believed she was right on target.

As a Tsalagi junior faculty member at YU, I was “volunteered” to serve on most diversity committees at either the college or university level. At one point I was invited to attend an introductory Cultural Diversity Committee meeting and found my name prominently listed on the blackboard as the chair of a committee and a member of the executive com-

mittee—all of this without my knowledge or without being asked! My friend, Harry, who is Eastern Cherokee, was just as surprised when he found himself listed as a diversity committee member, having never been consulted. As two of only three Indian faculty members on campus, there was a general expectation that we would serve on these committees in order to somehow represent all Indigenous faculty and student interests on campus. This colonial mentality presumed that all Indians were alike and had an obligation to educate all non-Indigenous faculty, students, and staff about our histories, cultures, and contemporary struggles—all of this in addition to our regular service, teaching, and research duties as faculty members.

As an Indigenous junior faculty member, I often felt as if I had no choice but to accept every speaking engagement and diversity committee assignment that came my way. Who would convey Indigenous histories and struggles if I did not? I tested that premise one November by not organizing any activities during Native American Heritage Month (as I usually did). Consequently, no activities were planned. During one academic year, I gave twenty-two lectures to local and regional organizations regarding Indigenous issues and served on over ten committees (in addition to my usual departmental service, teaching, and research requirements). I quickly learned to say no to any demands on my time that compromised what truly mattered: my relationships with family and friends.

When attending meetings relating to diversity on and off campus, I was always curious how diversity was both defined and put into practice. In many cases, given the terrible history of slavery in the South, diversity was considered a black and white issue. In fact, the Cultural Diversity Committee (CDC) at YU prioritized recruitment and retention of African American students, staff, and faculty in promoting the “pluralistic concerns” of diversity.

Despite YU’s location on ancestral Tsalagi homelands, Indigenous concerns were deemed secondary in the CDC diversity hierarchy. As I constantly fought this narrow conceptualization of the term, it was clear that these committees did little to address significant needs on campus for recruitment, retention, and cross-cultural education. Most of the time, they were launching pads for surveys (a.k.a. “climate studies”); departmental and university censuses of the number of “diverse” faculty, students, and staff on campus; and finding ways to create new diversity committees and subcommittees. It was clearly a case of good intentions leading to misguided policies.

This is not to say that committee members were not committed to diversity issues, however. In general, it seemed that due to budget and resource limitations, we never moved beyond bureaucratic paper shuffling and diversity lip service. Most often, university administrators, including the vice president for multicultural affairs, would justify diversity programs as positive vehicles for all students in marketing themselves for future job opportunities. Apparently, in such a consumer-driven environment, principles of diversity and cross-cultural education could not exist on their own merits unless marketed properly.

As a Tsalagi junior faculty member, I had to dance with several egos in order to survive in the university environment. In one instance, a multicultural fellow, which is a title given to faculty and staff who contribute to the university's mission "of fostering a welcoming community for all," informed me that "At some point, you [blanketed term for Indigenous people/activists] need to leave the table so that we [code for white power elite] can set policy." I was stunned as my friend's theory seemed to be playing out right in front of my eyes.

LACKING ACCOUNTABILITY

During my five years at YU I had been an outspoken opponent of the Eurocentric curriculum and Indian mascots in the local public schools (the middle school "Braves," high school "Shawnees," and high school "Indians" mascots have since been retired). Alongside other Indians and concerned parents, I had helped to form a small, grassroots group dedicated advocating for American Indian concerns, which agitated the county school board to take action on the mascot issue and other issues of racism haunting the public schools. Given that this was a highly controversial issue at YU and the surrounding community, a senior faculty member invited me to appear on his weekly public television show. With the professor acting as a moderator, another panelist and I discussed the issue of Indian mascots in local public schools.

After the taping, the professor seemed intrigued by the topic and continued the discussion by asking me "how much Indian are you?" I told him in some detail that this was an inappropriate question given the colonial history of blood quantum measurements and that this question of pedigree is not posed to any other cultural group in the United States. Undaunted, the professor flouted his ignorance even further by stating

"I'll bet I'm even more Indian than you are." I replied that while he may have ancestors who were Cherokee (probably Cherokee "princesses" if I had pressed him further!), he had no conception of what being a Cherokee entailed. There was no use in continuing the conversation at that point. I later realized how mistaken I was for believing that this brief conversation had run its course.

On the final day of classes that semester, one student in my Indigenous Peoples and World Politics course approached me after everyone else had left the room. He cautiously looked around to make sure the room was empty and asked me if I had heard anything about an introductory course taught by a particular professor. While I was not familiar with the course, I told him that I had met the professor, who was the host of the public television show that I had appeared on. Under promise of confidentiality, the student told me that the professor had come into class the day after our taping and opened the lecture with a joke about a Mexican "stand-off." The professor then proceeded to ask an audience of approximately two hundred students if they "knew who Jeff Corntassel was." Based on the student's recollection, the professor then stated that I "take things too far" and was "out of line on the mascot issue." According to the professor, I "didn't even look Indian," and he went on to state, "I'm just as Indian, if not more, than Corntassel is." The student then told me that he thought I should know what was being said about me and that he would not have given it a second thought were it not for the topics we covered in the Indigenous Peoples and World Politics course, which made him more aware of the importance of these issues. I thanked him for having the courage to step forward and would "count coup" for making such an impact on this student another day.

I was enraged at the outright racism of this act. Here was a clear case of someone abusing their authority in the classroom to attack my heritage and character. Before proceeding I received verification from three other students present in the professor's class on the day in question. Even under the cloak of anonymity, one female student was terrified that the professor would find out about her involvement in the situation and would destroy her future career aspirations. She also conveyed that she was very uncomfortable with the professor's sexist remarks to the class throughout the semester. In the words of Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, "Racism and sexism drink from the same wells and spit out similar words."⁷

There was no doubt that I would seek accountability from this professor for his harmful words. What I sought was a public apology and a way to ensure that he would never do this again to students and/or professors of any culture or gender. I received amazing support from my home department of political science to proceed with a formal complaint via the Office of Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action (EO/AA). An EO/AA caseworker agreed that the complaint was valid and began an investigation into the matter.

When informed of the complaint being filed, the professor dashed off an e-mail to my department chair saying that there was nothing wrong with his conduct in the class and that my department chair actually owed him an apology for daring to slight his character. In a subsequent e-mail, the professor asked whether a formal meeting was necessary to resolve this issue: “Why can’t Jeff and I go to lunch (my treat) and have a genuine discussion?” In the meantime, I received no word on the EO/AA investigation and would occasionally e-mail the caseworker to check on the progress. After almost seven months of EO/AA inaction, my department chair and I sent another e-mail inquiry to the caseworker. She now referred to this as a personnel matter and stated that the professor’s department chair was handling it. When I inquired about the details of the “handling,” the caseworker replied that the department chair had written a “disciplinary letter,” the contents of which I was not privy to, and had placed the letter in the professor’s file. Justice is sometimes delayed, but the professor’s television show was cancelled due to budget cuts two years later. Case closed.

FIGHTING THE SAME BATTLES

One Tsalagi word for warrior is *ani-edoh*, which is translated as “one who walks about in that environment”; the plural version means “whatever war produces, they meet.” At the university I felt as though I was always walking “about in that environment.” The only things that kept me sane were long discussions with my wife and other Indian faculty and friends, prayers, ceremonial life (that is, sweats, singing our songs, etc.), and help from ancestors. Upon visiting the YU campus and hearing our stories, a Cherokee/Creek professor proclaimed, “I thought we already fought these battles. You’re fighting the same damn battles that we fought in the 1970s.”

In the Eurocentric context of YU and other universities, I have found

that choosing your battles wisely is a major challenge. One can easily get overwhelmed and isolated by challenging every instance of colonialism on campus. It is often a struggle to see beyond what Maori scholar Graham Smith calls the “politics of distraction” and focus on the bigger picture.⁸ As a Tsalagi friend once told me, “Always ask yourself, is this the hill you want to die on?”

On campus it seemed that our battles were always centered around being Indian within a university setting. For example, in 2002 our drum group wanted to sing and hold a teach-in on campus during Indigenous Peoples Day (a.k.a. Columbus Day). We had received permission from the university officials to set up and sing at a particular location outside the student union. Our celebration of survival went well that day, with informative talks given by two Indigenous leaders and plenty of singing and dancing for hundreds of participating students, faculty, and staff. The following day organizers of the event received a scathing e-mail from a university bureaucrat. She claimed that we intentionally deceived them by not disclosing the true nature of the event and that “amplification” of any form (in this case our drum was considered amplification) was prohibited at the university. We were also regarded as a “disruption” as they had received several “noise” complaints from faculty and staff—even though no one had approached us directly. Mysteriously, no one ever seemed to complain about the Corps of Cadets’ “amplification” on campus—they could yell out cadence, march, and fire cannons at any time of the day. My friend Harry’s remark said it all: “You can’t even be Indian on this campus anymore.”

Battle lines were drawn again when we attempted to establish the first American Indian studies program in the region. Without crucial help from the Indigenous nations in the area, this program may never have been created. In 1999 one Indigenous nation initiated the process by sending a letter to the president of Yoneda University and other university officials asking why, as a land-grant university, YU had not yet established an American Indian studies program. By 2000 a proposal was in place, and Indigenous course curricula was laid out with strong support from the dean of arts and sciences. Knowing that we had a long road ahead of us, Sam, Harry, myself, and others submitted course proposals for the approval of the Arts and Sciences Curriculum Committee. On November 2, 2001, a curriculum committee spokesperson e-mailed the committee’s comments to each of us. Buried amidst these comments was something that had little to do with our proposed program: “This is rather

a sore point at the moment because of pressure put on the School Board to change the name and mascot of the Indians, pressure that appears to come directly from one or two self-appointed ‘representatives’ of all American Indians everywhere.”

As one of these so-called “representatives,” I failed to see how this personal attack had any relevance to the American Indian studies program proposal. Unlike the previous EO/AA complaint, I was told not to take any action on the statement as it would be handled appropriately. Yet this was the same committee that challenged my choice of texts for my proposed Indigenous Peoples and World Politics course based on their profound lack of knowledge of the field and then ordered me to provide an adequate definition of Indigenous or risk compromising the “legitimacy” of our field of study (despite the fact that neither the United Nations nor any other global organization can adequately define the world’s 350 million Indigenous peoples!). Fortunately, we had strong support from an associate dean, who demanded an apology from the committee. In the course of accounting for their white-privileged ethnocentrism, some committee members pointed out that they were “scientists” and part of a “real discipline” while we were “just trying to spread our propaganda.”

The Curriculum Committee spokesperson eventually e-mailed an apology, essentially stating that she was sorry to have shared so much information with us. Curriculum Committee comments notwithstanding, the American Indian studies program proposal was eventually approved by the university and is successful under the leadership of its program coordinator and partnerships with the state-recognized Indigenous nations in the region. *Ani-edoh*.

ONCE EVERY BLUE CORN MOON

I have found that humor is an important way of coping with university life. Friends and I would joke about how many times the police had been summoned to the building to investigate a “pungent odor” coming from my office. The sage and cedar I burned for a smudge was often mistaken for marijuana by other faculty in the building. On one occasion I was “smoking” a friend’s office and two police officers showed up. As I smudged the office with an eagle feather, the first officer on the scene asked what I was doing. Having learned that providing too much information only confuses people further, I told him as little as possible about

the ceremony. He replied, "Oh, I was in boy scouts once—I understand this stuff." I felt as if I had just pulled off a Jedi mind trick when the officer explained the complete details of this "Native American ceremony" to his partner as justification for the smudge.

My favorite story to tell about my experiences at *YU* is the "blue corn moon" incident. An elementary school teacher called me one day and asked if I had any knowledge of a "blue corn moon" that she believed was definitely related to a Native ceremony. Being inherently suspicious, I asked how she got my phone number. She informed me that she had initially called *YU*'s astronomy department. When the astronomy professor could not field her question, he said that there was an Indian professor on campus named Corntassel, and since he had "corn" in his name, he probably knew what she was talking about. I was barely able to suppress laughter at this point and asked her to go on describing this blue corn moon. The woman said she had just watched the Disney movie *Pocahontas*, and one of the songs in the movie had a line about "colors of the wind and the blue corn moon." Since Native American Heritage Month was coming up, this woman wanted to pay homage to Native peoples by teaching her class about the blue corn moon. I still thought this was a joke, but the woman was insistent in finding out everything possible about the blue corn moon.

I could not believe what I was hearing and told this teacher that even though I had not seen the movie, this was probably a Disney creation and had no bearing on reality. Unable to hold back laughter any longer, I told her that I would look into the situation and call her back. Later that week, I called the woman back with contact information for the Mattaponi, who claim to be lineal descendants of Pocahontas. I told her that they would probably laugh her off the phone because this was a fictional creation. Sure enough, the woman called me back later that week with an update; just as I suspected, the Mattaponi informed her that the blue corn moon was indeed a fictional creation. Undaunted, the woman said, "No matter what they say, I know the blue corn moon is out there and I'm going to find it." Having never heard from her again, I wonder if she ever found what she was looking for.

SURVIVING ACADEMIC HAZING RITUALS

Just as in one's undergraduate and graduate education, junior faculty members are subjected to several academic "hazing rituals" when start-

ing a new position. These might take the form of annual reviews, additional committee assignments, special duties, diversity appointments, peer reviews, and so forth. When faced with such adversity, Tsalagi people tend to utilize a strategy of “survive, adapt, prosper, and excel.” I have shared these stories from the heart regarding my five years at YU in hopes that Indigenous scholars will not merely survive within university systems, but excel. Also, this article was not intended to demean anyone doing good work at YU, as I developed several close friendships with people at the university and in the larger community (“Judge situations, not people”). I had numerous positive experiences as a faculty member there, but, as this article demonstrates, there is still much work to be done. These stories expose some new faces of colonialism and preexisting stereotypes at universities today. Indigenous scholars, staff, and students should be ready to confront them.

There are several things that I learned from my experiences at YU, including choosing my battles wisely, speaking from the heart, saying no to overextending my time commitments, forging strong partnerships with Indigenous communities in the area, and maintaining a healthy sense of humor. Rather than adopting a “walking in two worlds” philosophy, I was Tsalagi first and foremost. My relations with friends, family, kinfolk, Tsalagi homelands, and ceremonial life helped me to cope with the artificiality of university life.

Ultimately, I decided to leave YU and take a tenure-track job with the Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Victoria. After a great amount of prayer and discussion with friends and family, this was the right decision for my wife and me. It was a difficult decision given such strong support from colleagues in the political science department and at the university, but I no longer wanted to split my time between an American Indian studies program and political science—I wanted to devote my full energies to Indigenous studies, which is where my heart is. I am a Tsalagi warrior and activist who also happens to be an academic.

NOTES

This article is dedicated to the memory of R. Leon Corntassel, who inspired this work and passed over on December 19, 2002. I also thank my wife, Laura Parisi, for her love and wisdom that keep me grounded.

1. Perhaps as much as skin color, “white” in this case describes the belief systems of those holding individualistic, predatory, capitalist worldviews.

2. I should point out that several faculty members in the political science department were accommodating and supportive of my interview. The faculty members labeling me as “an activist posing as an academic” were predominantly from the subfield of American politics.

3. Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 2.

4. Bob made this point abundantly clear in his writings and teachings. See, for example, Carol Nadjiwon’s article, “Dr. Robert K. Thomas: A Cherokee War Chief in Modern Times” in *A Good Cherokee, A Good Anthropologist*, ed. Steve Pavlik (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California, 1998), 227–31.

5. This roughly translates into “I will always be up above in all things that influence me in life; in the uppermost for us to follow or emulate” (Benny Smith [Cherokee Nation], elder and director of Counseling Services at Haskell Indian Nations University, telephone interview, March 5, 2003).

6. Quoted from her lecture on April 1, 1999, at YU.

7. Eduardo Galeano, *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking Glass World* (New York: Picador, 2000), 66.

8. Graham Hingangaroa Smith, “Protecting and Respecting Indigenous Knowledge” in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press), 209–24.