



**"MY GREAT-GREAT-GRANDMOTHER
WAS A CHEROKEE PRINCESS" ETHNIC BOUNDARIES
IN POWWOW DISCOURSE**

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Abstract:

This ethnography of speaking offers an interpretive analysis of the cognitive and social functions of a discourse delivered publicly by the emcee of an American Indian dance gathering called powwow, during which assertions of a quasi-native identity made by white Americans are indirectly contested for not meeting specific expectations such as membership in an officially recognized Indian tribe.

Keywords: contested American Indian identity, rhetorical indirectness, ethnography of speaking

1. Introduction

Powwows are one or two-day native dance celebrations in the United States and Canada which provide the predominant frame for the construction of ever-evolving identity schemata of indigeneity. In far-reaching implications, the powwow has become a meaningful expression of a pan-tribal North American Indian ethnicity, especially in off-reservation locations, where maintaining a separate tribal identity can be particularly challenging. Though to outsiders it may appear as a mere dance performance for entertainment, the powwow is contemplated by its participants as a sacred space which contains a subtext dedicated to the emblematic resolution of the enormous psychological predicament of coming to terms with what Bourdieu (1987) has characterized as the symbolic violence perpetrated by the hegemony. And though members of other ethnicities are welcome to attend as spectators, their intrusions into native social spheres or their cultural appropriations are resented and are discouraged with rhetorical indirectness.

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2. The Ethnographic Setting

Held in a public park, a school gymnasium, or an athletic field, these dance gatherings are defined by the iconic traditions of the Great Plains, even though many participants do not hail from that native cultural province. Choruses of five to ten men huddled around large rawhide drums strike a steady beat and chant in piercing falsetto while dancers in spectacular regalia of fringed buckskin, bright cloth, and feathers delight the spectator with a feast of rhythmic colors. Often referred to as war dances, ethnologists and ethnomusicologists have traced them to the Grass, Scalp, Calumet, and Stomp dances of the Great Plains and the Great Lakes (Howard 1955, 16; Young 1981, 103; Browner 2000).

The organization of various performance episodes, such as dance contests, honorings, and special presentations is in the hands of an arena director whose directives are relayed over a public address system by an emcee. During interludes, emcees frequently engage in explanations of esoteric powwow protocols and sometimes offer commentaries regarding expected etiquette and other topics relevant to the occasion. Relying on English as the lingua franca, emcees address their audiences in very specific terms and often in a deliberate order for the marking of an ethnic boundary. In intertribal powwow contexts, Indians, regardless of tribal affiliation, are addressed either as "my relations," derived from Lakota *Mitakuye Oyasin*, or as "brothers and sisters." The term "friends" is usually employed for other ethnicities, mostly Anglo-American and Hispanic spectators, who quite often comprise the majority in sheer numbers. They are acknowledged, welcomed, and encouraged to patronize the numerous vendors hawking native crafts, whose station fees help finance the event. But otherwise, this ever-present large segment is rarely addressed and is thus suppressed to the interactional margin of the main event.

Yet, many spectators, some of whom have never seen powwow dances, are drawn to such events in their desire to connect with their own purported aboriginal ancestry, often anachronized into so many past generations that only a dim awareness of the genealogical relationship survives. Nevertheless, the pretense of an indigenous progenitor seems to bestow on some European Americans a sense of entitlement to legitimate the antiquity of their birthright and thus to authenticate the tenure of their lineage on the continent to the exclusion of more recent and often stigmatized groups of immigrants. Per contra, assertions of a dubious indigenous ancestor by whites are unequivocally dismissed and even derided by card-carrying Indians enrolled in federally recognized tribes. Some go a step further in their censure and deem such "fictions" an unwelcome crossing of an ethnic boundary.

3. The Corpus

Such a perceived transgression is addressed in the following public discourse, in which Ruben Littlehead, the emcee for the Kalispel intertribal powwow in Usk, Washington,

apparently felt impelled to draw for his audience indirectly but emphatically an unyielding line of demarcation which separates Indians from other ethnicities:

"It seems to me no matter where I go in Indian Country . . . there's always one . . . one . . . woman Caucasian woman that says you know what Ruben . . . I'm part Indian too but I can't prove it . . . you know . . . and I believe her . . . but at the same time she says my great-great-grandmother was a . . . Cherokee princess . . . there's over five hundred tribes in the United States and it always has to fall back to Cherokee . . . well I believe you I believe you . . . well I'm not saying anything else but . . . I did some research . . . and I traveled to Tahlequah Oklahoma the Cherokee headquarters down there in Tahlequah Oklahoma . . . and I went to the late . . . the late Wilma Manford . . . she was the tribal chairwoman at that time . . . and I said . . . Miss Manford . . . long ago did the Cherokee tribe have royalty . . . were there princesses . . . and she said no: no . . . I said okay . . . so I went back up north and I went back on the powwow trail . . . I looked around . . . and was waiting for that one . . . white person to come up and say Ruben . . . my great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess . . . and sure enough . . . this morning in the back here when I pulled up . . . this Caucasian woman came up and said Ruben . . . I wanted to tell you that my great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess and I said hold up . . . I did some research and I found out there was no royalty there was no princesses back then . . . I'm gonna believe you more and I'll . . . understand it better . . . if you just told me . . . that your great-great-grandmother . . . loved Indian men and that ought to be better . . . [laughter]"
(. . . indicates pauses and hesitations of noticeable length, : indicates drawl)

Notwithstanding the recurrence of a general and thus predictable structure in powwows throughout the continent, each event has a unique dynamic shaped largely by the personality of the emcee. Ideally a man of good temperament and good humor, his charms, or polite reserve, establish the vibe for any such event. Sensitivity is certainly more appreciated than clever articulation of irony or audience response to gratuitous jokes. While gentle joking is expected, controversial political or social topics are generally considered off-limits. If a prickly issue, such as the one in Ruben Littlehead's discourse, must be broached, indirectness is valued above all rhetorical strategies.

4. The Discourse of Exclusion

After hedging, Ruben frames his discourse with a locative phrase frequently used in powwows that refers not so much to an unambiguous geographic region but signifies any North American space, reservation or urban, defined not only by the permanent habitation but also by the temporary gatherings of Indian people, who are, in their *weltanschauung*, the rightful owners of the continent:

"It seems to me no matter where I go in Indian Country . . ."

Implied in its semantics are the survival of genocide, a resistance to hegemony, and a revitalization of traditions such as the powwow. Along these lines, the influential Anishinaabe (Chippewa) novelist and cultural critic Gerald Vizenor (1994) contends that Indian survival in and of itself is a form of resistance against a hostile federal government as well as an abetting mainstream society that attempt to efface, or at least ignore, native culture all together. Coining the portmanteau "Survivance," a blend of "survival" and "resistance," Vizenor galvanizes native people to deflate and subvert stereotypical images of the "vanishing Indian" by embracing traditions and demonstrating their viability in contemporary contexts. Thus, the appellation "Indian Country" as the spiritual origo of an ideological construct signifies in no uncertain terms the Survivance of Manifest Destiny and its aftermath.

Since a powwow depends in large part on spectators as a source of revenue for funding the event, it is clear from the processing breakdowns evidenced by the pauses that Ruben Littlehead is groping for a designation which would allow him to distance himself from, without inadvertently offending anyone of, the majority ethnic group:

“ . . . there’s always one . . . one . . . woman Caucasian woman that says you know what Ruben . . . ”

Stumbling onto a racial term derived from an outdated anthropological nomenclature which until the mid-twentieth century had embedded itself in American bureaucratic discursive practices, Ruben is thus able to access an antiseptic semantic domain to avoid the potentially repellent label "white woman." More frequently, however, powwow emcees can be heard referring to Anglo Americans as "non-Indians," a term which seems to appeal to a sensibility of racial disinterest for the communication of politeness.

The strategy of direct discourse provides Ruben with pauses for utterance planning and facilitates a more vivid narrative than reported speech would make available. Furthermore, by remaining in the historical present, he is able to heighten the dramatic force of his narrative by recapitulating the interaction as if it were still unfolding:

“ . . . I’m part Indian too but I can’t prove it . . . ”

The adverbial of addition marks the supposed anecdotal attempt of crossing the ethnic boundary. Discernibly, however, the fictive essence of the sketch reveals itself in Ruben's paraphrase of his protagonist's peculiar admission of lacking official sanction of her native status, a criterion with which most white spectators would not be familiar. The public is generally in conversant with enrollment in a federally recognized tribe as the lydian stone for claiming a native identity among Indians in the United States and Canada. Those who may profess native ancestry but lack this basic requisite are not

extended the services owed by government treaty obligations and are regarded with suspicion by the "real Indians" as to the veracity of their assertions.

Nevertheless, in his presentation of self, framed by pauses and hesitations for utterance planning, Ruben endeavors to appear open-minded enough to give his protagonist the benefit of the doubt:

"... you know ... and I believe her ..."

Yet, given the skepticism of most Indians regarding such avowals, Ruben may simply be motivated to characterize himself as displaying politeness.

Preceded by a pause for climactic impact, a conjunction of contrast followed by a phrasal adverbial of time set up the crux of Ruben's overall discursive topos:

"... but at the same time, she says my great-great-grandmother was a ... Cherokee princess ..."

Paradoxically enough, his following ventured representative speech act discloses his nescience with respect to Cherokee cultural history:

"... there's over five hundred tribes in the United States and it always has to fall back to Cherokee ..."

Indubitably, among the most cited Indian tribes postulated as forebears by European Americans are the Cherokee. The extent to which this is the case has been graphically captured by census data which in 2010 reported 819,105 individuals declaring at least one such ancestor (US Census Bureau). Some of these seemingly illusory reclamations, usually based solely on fragmentary oral family histories, may indeed echo eighteenth and nineteenth-century Cherokee cultural accommodation strategies that encouraged intermarriage as both a diplomatic tool and as a means of incorporating white traders into reciprocal bonds of kinship. An eminent offspring of such a union was John Ross, the celebrated Chief of the Cherokee from 1828 to 1866. The son of a mixed blood mother and a Scottish father, Ross would nowadays be classified by the federal government as one-eighth Indian by blood quantum (Hicks 2011). Often referred to as the Moses of his people, Ross led the Cherokee through the most traumatic chapter of their history, the forced removal from Georgia to Oklahoma on the infamous "Trail of Tears." Thus, it is especially in the southern states that a striking number of whites proclaim descent from a distant Cherokee maternal progenitor who is often imaginatively elevated to the rank of princess, even though the Cherokee lacked any such forms of aristocratic or hereditary titles.

In recovering his presentation of self as a supposedly open-minded person, Ruben lands on an island of reliability whose pauses, pause fillers and repetition permit him to plan the next narrative episode (Albright 2002):

"... well I believe you I believe you ... well I'm not saying anything else but ..."

It is especially the conjunction of contrast with its subsequent pause that sets up the following background construction:

"... I did some research ... and I traveled to Tahlequah Oklahoma the Cherokee headquarters down there in Tahlequah Oklahoma ... and I went to the late ... the late Wilma Manford ... she was the tribal chairwoman at that time ... and I said ... Miss Manford ... long ago did the Cherokee tribe have royalty ... were there princesses ... and she said no: no ... I said okay ..."

Characterized by a divergent mode of presentation, a background construction impacts on the main narrative by interspersing a segment characterized by a digression which seeks to satisfy the speaker's need to rationalize or, at least, elaborate the preceding episode (Schütze 2014, 252). Hence, Ruben suddenly switches to the past tense to mark a new narrative episode (Muñoz 2018). In addition, he inserts descriptive detail grounded in specificity such as place names, personal names, and titles, all precise lexical choices which appeal to the expectations in judging the truth value of discourse by speakers of American English (Hansen and Wänke 2010). Seemingly well informed with regard to the location and pronunciation of the capital of the Cherokee Nation, Ruben is less sure, as evidenced by a repetition to gain additional processing time, with reference to the late chairwoman's surname, which he recalls inaccurately as "Manford." The recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States' highest civilian honor, Wilma Mankiller was greatly esteemed in Indian Country and beyond for her work as an activist, social worker, community developer, and, in particular, as the first woman elected to serve as the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, one of the largest Indian tribes in North America (Wikipedia). Inadvertently, Ruben's attempt to associate himself with such a luminary is undermined by his blunder of her surname as well as by his pseudo-quotation of her oddly terse and drawled response to his query about conjectured Cherokee royalty, which thus shifts the entire alleged interaction into another fictive realm.

The completion of the background construction is signaled with a discourse marker most commonly appropriated for the indexing of inferential or causal connections. Ruben, on the other hand, deploys this device to lead into the next narrative episode without triggering a switch back to the present tense (Bolden 2009):

"... so I went back up north and I went back on the powwow trail ... I looked around ... and was waiting for that one ... white person to come up and say Ruben ... my great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess ..."

The idiomatic construction of the directional preposition conjoined with the cardinal point, in this case brought into play as a signifier of the native cultural provinces

of the Northern Plains and Great Lakes, sets up the context for the next spurious interaction with another claimant of an indigenous royal ancestor, whose fictitious title is repeated for coherence. Searching again for a polite racial term, Ruben stumbles a bit, as evidenced by the preceding hesitation, and then compensates his resort to a less desirable racial designation by settling on a subsequent gender-neutral lexeme.

Yet, his preference for archaic racial terminology and female gender quickly re-emerges, both of which are prefaced by a deictic marker employed as an indefinite article:

“... and sure enough ... this morning in the back here when I pulled up ... this Caucasian woman came up and said Ruben ... I wanted to tell you that my great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess and I said hold up ... I did some research and I found out there was no royalty there was no princesses back then ... ”

In tandem with temporal as well as spatial deixes, these devices bring the narrative effectively to the *hic et nunc*. In addition, by continuing to rely on direct discourse, Ruben can conveniently interject pauses needed for utterance planning and dramatic impact, all of which keeps the narrative vivid. Further coherence is facilitated by the redundancy of the same number of generations of ancestors and the identical royal title of previous claimants.

One of the first public intellectuals to draw awareness to the romantic self-deceptive lure of the Cherokee Princess Syndrome was the social critic Vine Deloria (1969, 3). Deeply embedded in white American folklore, the mental model of the quintessential Indian princess can be traced, nonetheless, to the historical "Lady" Pocahontas, who, during a tour of England, was announced to Queen Anne in a letter of introduction from John Smith (1616), the former president of the Jamestown settlement, as "the most dear and well-beloved daughter" of "King" Powhatan. Her implied status as a princess was also very likely promoted to the English public by the Virginia Company in pursuance of investments for their financially struggling colonial enterprise. Oblivious to their incomprehension of tribal organizations, the English confided in their analogies of their own aristocratic hierarchies in constructing their cognitive maps of the political structures of native peoples of the Atlantic coast. Be that as it may, Pocahontas's pivotal position in American mythology ultimately owes not so much to her putative native nobility but to her marriage to the English tobacco planter John Rolfe and to her acceptance of the Anglican faith. In other words, she needed to exile herself from her "savage" kin and become an English-speaking Christian in order to be accepted into the pantheon of American pseudo-history (Klein and Ackerman 1995, 6).

As Ruben's discourse seems to suggest, the Indian princess syndrome tends to strike white women in particular (Haire 2012). A notorious case is Massachusetts's liberal senator and Wall-Street-watchdog Elizabeth Warren, who alleges a blood quantum of 1/32 Cherokee but has no proof beyond family lore and her observation that some members of her family had "*high cheekbones like all of the Indians do*" (Will 2012). When it

was publicly divulged that the phenotypically Nordic Warren was listed by Harvard University as a minority faculty member based on self-identification, she earned the sobriquet "Fauxcahontas" from conservatives who were eager to point out her hypocrisy in her accusations of Wall Street's gaming the financial system while she "*collaborated with, and perhaps benefited from, the often absurd obsession with 'diversity'*" (Will 2012).

In Indian Country, the Cherokee Princess Syndrome is also the source of seemingly endless anecdotes and jokes, which makes the credibility of the general topos in Ruben's narrative palpable enough. In his closing remarks, the subtext of a somewhat dormant but enduring racist sexual taboo emerges ad rem:

" . . . I'm gonna believe you more and I'll . . . understand it better . . . if you just told me . . . that your great-great-grandmother . . . loved Indian men and that ought to be better . . . "

The native ancestor adverted by whites seems to be invariably a noble femme, with attractive physical features thrown in for good measure. Apparently, claims of an Indian prince, even a handsome one, as a progenitor are non-existent. Harkening back to the prohibition of sexual relations between white women and men of color, the image of a dusky savage male in the family tree might have been too unpalatable.

Notwithstanding that much of Rubin's reconstructed direct discourse is fictive, it is, more importantly, an allusion to the third rail of white privilege. In the rigid racial caste system of the twentieth century, anti-miscegenation laws attempted to implement the one-drop rule, which limited the civil rights of any person with even one ancestor of color. Ironically, however, some of the leading families of Virginia descended from the union of John and Rebecca Rolfe, the baptized Pocahontas. Consequently, the drafters of the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924 found themselves compelled in no uncertain terms to add an exception referred to as the "Pocahontas Clause," which allowed a maximum Indian blood quantum of one-sixteenth without losing one's legal status as a white person (Tallbear 2003). Ergo, a Cherokee-princess ancestor who was far enough removed to be at least a "great-great-grandmother" could be acknowledged, perhaps even honored, without infringing upon one's socio-economic privilege.

5. Conclusion

This ethnography of speaking has made available an interpretive analysis of a discursive contestation of assertions of a quasi-native identity by white Americans within the space of a North American Indian dance gathering called powwow. Affirmations of a dubious indigenous ancestor are usually dismissed outright by Indians who acknowledge as the only valid litmus test for indigeneity the enrollment in a federally recognized tribe. Some may even consider the insinuation of such "fictions" an unwelcome crossing of an ethnic boundary. In a publicly delivered discourse, a powwow emcee addresses that perceived transgression indirectly by constructing a narrative comprised primarily of fictive

episodes. The role of tales in the reinforcement of values and ideologies is surely universal; however, what has been reported as unique for traditional American Indian societies is a strong reliance on the rhetorical strategy of indirectness. To cite just one example, a considerable amount of the semiotic embodiment in Western Apache oral tradition encompasses mythic and quasi-historical incidents associated with specific landmarks whose narratives offer moral precepts. The mere mention of any such place name then releases a metacommunicative message which is expected to trigger the collective memory of its associated didactic text and thus elicit indirectly from the individual who has transgressed community norms of behavior a posture of reflection and remorse (Basso 1996). Similarly, with greatly embellished, perhaps even mostly invented, vignettes and with "Indian Country" as the spiritual deictic center of his narrative, the emcee Ruben Littlehead endeavors to discourage indirectly cultural appropriations and intrusions into the dynamics of intertribal identity processes within the powwow space. In the context of the ideology of Survivance, the emcee's social distancing from Cherokee-princess-ancestor claimants can be understood as a resistance to attempts by European Americans to hijack native status and at the same time absolve themselves of the complicity of their settler-colonist forefathers in the genocide and land theft committed against the native peoples of this continent by Manifest Destiny.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

About the Author

Guillermo Bartelt is a sociolinguist who has focused his ethnographic and linguistic research on American Indian communities.

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