

Where Truth Telling and White Public Pedagogy Collide: Educative Barriers to Restorative Justice in Dakota Homeland

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Introduction

The first half of the nineteenth century marked a time when white power brokers drew the color line through Dakota homeland (*Mni Sota Makoce*) by various means, including fraudulent treaties.¹ By 1860, the Dakota people found themselves confined to a narrow reservation running through southwestern Minnesota, a 10- by 140-mile strip of land that cut them off from their traditional sources of life. Facing no-win choices between imposed cultural change and starvation, hundreds of Dakota warriors rebelled in the summer of 1862, attacking traders, government agents, and settler families throughout the region, killing approximately 500 whites. The response from settler society was severe, including an extermination campaign unleashed in the press, new forms of exclusionary legislation passed by politicians, and two subsequent years of genocidal massacres² carried out against native peoples into the Dakota Territory. With the official removal of the Dakota in the spring of 1863, *Mni Sota Makoce* had become “white-man’s country.”³

Writing in anticipation of the state’s 150th anniversary in 2008, historian Waziyata Win identified the sesquicentennial period as “an ideal time to initiate a new era of truth telling in Minnesota to counter the 150 years of myth making” (p. 11). Her book *What*

¹ Highlights in the body of literature documenting the fraudulent nature of the treaties affecting the Dakota people include Roy Meyer’s chapter “The Monstrous Conspiracy,” from *History of the Santee Sioux: United States Indian Policy on Trial* (1967), and Gwen Westerman and Bruce White’s chapter “Drawing Lines on Sacred Land: the Dakota Treaties” from *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota* (2012).

² For a discussion of the events in the Dakota Territory in the 1860s as genocidal massacres, see Ben Kiernan’s *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (2007) (p. 355). In explaining his use of the term genocide, Kiernan explains, “Terms like genocide, extinction, extermination, civil war, ethnic ‘cleansing,’ war crimes, and biological warfare all represent independent and often overlapping concepts, neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. For instance, in wartime, killing soldiers in combat is routine and distinct from the prohibited mass murder of civilians. Such mass murder, even if it ends once all resistance stops, is a war crime and may also qualify as either genocide or genocidal massacres if it targets protected groups” (p. 16).

³ In *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (2008) Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds survey the many exclusionary practices that worked to divide the world into “white” and “colored” domains in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, setting Great Britain and its English-speaking colonial states apart as privileged, self-governing “white men’s countries” (pp. 4-7). While the authors do not treat the specific history in question here, I count the expulsion and legal exclusion of the Dakota from Minnesota as belonging to the broader global movement their work analyzes.

Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland (2008) challenged white readers in particular to acknowledge the crimes against humanity through which their state was made—including genocide—her purpose being to make acts of restorative justice imaginable for *Mni Sota Makoce*'s people today.

This paper examines an important instance where Waziyata Win's vision was put to the test during the sesquicentennial of the U.S.–Dakota War in 2012, in a college course taught on the subject near where the fighting once took place. By analyzing ethnographic data I collected as a participant-observer at St. Lucia College in Gotland, Minnesota,⁴ I will identify salient barriers to Waziyata Win's decolonial project as experienced by a group of young Minnesotans, many of whom expressed orientations favorable to her vision. First, I will give background on the current *public pedagogy* concerning the U.S.–Dakota War in southern Minnesota, meaning the *dominant discourses* (Sandlin, et al., 2011) through which the war is commonly discussed in local media and other institutions producing public knowledge. Second, I will give an overview of the college course and the traveling museum exhibit on the war that the students and instructors produced together. Finally, I will relate what three students told me about their exhibit writing experiences and, for two of them, their attempts to incorporate critical perspectives into their narratives.

Public Pedagogy of Balance and Neutrality

Following the work of Jennifer Sandlin, Michael O'Malley, and Jake Burdick who have mapped various uses of the term *public pedagogy* since the late nineteenth century, I apply it to mean the *dominant discourses*⁵ that express “pedagogical aspects of the cultural milieu, such as public policy, political discourse, [and] widespread cultural values” (Sandlin et al., p. 351). In the years surrounding the teaching of the St. Lucia College course (2010-2013), I have identified dominant discourses in statements made by people involved in local commemorative events, educational activities, and public knowledge production, for example, journalism. As St. Lucia College is situated less than twenty miles from Mankato, Minnesota, the site of the mass hanging of 38 Dakota men on December 26th, 1862, a majority of my data for this presentation comes from a body of over 80 newspaper articles and letters printed by the Mankato *Free Press*, the largest daily newspaper circulating in the south-central Minnesota community. The overview of local public pedagogy for my larger dissertation study includes data from public lectures, films and videos shown locally, radio programs, websites, magazine articles, public exhibits, and monuments.

In addition to Waziyata Win's call for land recovery for the Dakota people, which has been reported by local media,⁶ discourses of *reconciliation* have been expressed by both Dakotas and whites in different ways. While some Dakotas have spoken of reconciliation in terms of attaining the self-healing needed to overcome histories of

⁴ In keeping with the promise of anonymity, pseudonyms for place names and study participants are used throughout this presentation.

⁵ Following the work of Norman Fairclough, James Gee, and other critical-discourse analysts, I use the term “discourse” to mean “language as a form of social practice” (Fairclough, p. 16).

⁶ Edie Schmierbach, “Cyclist promotes land recovery for Dakota.” Mankato *Free Press*, October 14, 2013.

poverty, addiction, and abuse that afflict them as colonized people,⁷ reconciliation has also been presented as a joint effort between Dakotas and whites to attain mutual forgiveness and healing. For example, Peter Lengkeek, a Dakota 38 +2 Memorial Ride leader,⁸ says in the film *Dakota 38* (2012), “We’re trying to reconcile, unite, make peace with everyone.” Early in 2013, Lengkeek brought this message of reconciliation from the ride to local reporters, who wrote, “Along the way Lengkeek said he’s had ‘healing’ conversations with descendants of settlers killed during the war and even descendants of President Abraham Lincoln.”⁹ In line with this message of mutual reconciliation, Vernell Wabasha, a Dakota elder from nearby Lower Sioux Community, promoted the message “Forgive Everyone Everything” by having it engraved onto park benches surrounding the new monument erected in downtown Mankato on December 26th, 2012, which bears the names of the 38 men hanged in 1862.¹⁰ The Mankato *Free Press* heavily endorsed this message, emblazoning it across its front page the day after the monument dedication ceremony. Coverage of the previous day’s proceedings included mayor Eric Anderson’s proclamation of 2012 as “the year of ‘forgiveness and understanding.’”¹¹

This peaceful side to reconciliation has seen resistance from Dakota public intellectuals, most prominently from Waziyata Win and her father, Chris Mato Nunpa, both of whom have worked for decades as writers, professors, and human-rights activists to decolonize their homeland. In 2013, the Mankato *Free Press* reported on a roundtable discussion at a local college where Mato Nunpa critiqued peaceful reconciliation: “Mato Nunpa says most of the ‘reconciliation’ he’s seen between whites and Dakota Indians has been a superficial exercise. ‘We eat together, everyone is nice. We put on our feathers and dance for you, entertain. The white man feels good,’ Nunpa said. ‘There’s more to do than that. There are things that need to be done.’” Among the things Mato Nunpa mentioned needing redress were “the taking of land, bounties put on Dakota scalps in the 1860s, ‘concentration camps’ at Fort Snelling and elsewhere, and the attempt to kill and banish Indians from Minnesota. Then a returning of lands and payments for violated treaties.”¹² Within this resistance to peaceful reconciliation lies another meaning of reconciliation, i.e., truth and reconciliation like that seen in South Africa in recent decades. “A truth-telling forum,” Waziyata Win writes in *What Does Justice Look Like?*, would “disallow Minnesotans from denying or ignoring the history of genocide and the perpetration of human injustices,” a prerequisite, she argues, for restorative justice (p.

⁷ Reconciliation as a healing process within the Dakota community rather than between Dakotas and whites comes through periodically in the film *Dakota 38* (2012). Toward the end of the film, commemorative ride leader Jim Miller says, “We’ve gotta strive for that reconciliation. Lets’ go home and reconcile our families, our differences. Let’s go home and hug our children, tell them that we love them.” Early in the film, Miller says, “We don’t have to blame the wasicus [whites] anymore. We’re doing it for ourselves. We’re selling drugs. We’re killing our own people. And that’s what this ride’s about. It’s healing.”

⁸ The Dakota 38 + 2 Memorial Ride is a 2-3 week, 330-mile horseback ride beginning in Lower Brule, South Dakota, and ending in Mankato, Minnesota, on December 26th to honor the 38 men hanged in 1862.

⁹ Amanda Dyslin, “Film aims to inspire discussion of the U.S.-Dakota war,” *Mankato Free Press*, August 18, 2013.

¹⁰ Tim Krohn, “Council backs Dakota memorial plan,” *Mankato Free Press*, April 24, 2012.

¹¹ Tim Krohn, “Forgive everyone everything - Reconciliation the theme at commemoration of mass hangings 150 years ago,” *Mankato Free Press*, December 27, 2012.

¹² Tim Krohn, “Somber Dakota roundtable talk - ‘There’s more to do,’” *Mankato Free Press*, January 21, 2013.

11). Below, I will refer to this at times as “critical” reconciliation meaning that it centralizes unequal power relations between whites and natives, past and present.¹³

Tension between uncritical and critical reconciliation discourses, that is, healing and mutual forgiveness versus truth-telling as a catalyst for restorative justice, came through most dramatically in 2012 in the public discussion of a poem proposed for engraving onto the new monument to the 38 hanging victims. Performed in downtown Mankato on December 26th, 1971, by Conrad Balfour, Minnesota’s former human rights commissioner, this untitled poem focused on the hypocrisy of a people who would carry out a public mass execution the day after Christmas, their holiest time of the year. Presented in 2012 as “The Balfour poem,” this unpublished social-justice piece had apparently been selected by Vernell Wabasha in her conceptualization of the new monument.¹⁴ Within four days of its printing, a new poem had been drafted by a white descendant of a former Mankato State University historian, tentatively accepted by city council members, and reported on by the press.¹⁵ Early the following week, the *Free Press* printed an editorial “Our View” column entitled “The Goal is to Reconcile,” in which the editor attempted to canonize uncritical reconciliation for the public space where the new monument would stand:

But the city park, owned and maintained by the city, is named Reconciliation Park for a reason. The park, containing the buffalo statue across from the library, is to be a place where blame and judgment about the 1862 war can be set aside while Native Americans and area residents focus on commonality and learning more about each other.¹⁶

The words “is to be” helped carry a powerful message to the community that the newspaper, in its alignment with the authority of the City of Mankato, would define the ideological parameters within which Dakotas and whites could congregate in the park. In short, Reconciliation Park “was to be” a neutral and presumably apolitical space where “judgment,” something presented separately from “blame,” would be suspended. It is here, at the intersection of uncritical reconciliation with often entangled discourses of “balance,” “neutrality,” and “objectivity” that a larger white public pedagogy takes shape.

As Dakota commemorative run participant Ray Owen puts it in the film *Dakota 38*, “Reconciliation means something to everybody. And I think it’s a collective.” This astute observation helps make several points about what is meant by “discourse”—that reconciliation, as a discourse, constitutes no mere composite of words or beliefs, but rather a collective of people practicing reconciliation together and thereby enacting particular identities;¹⁷ that while repeated uses of a word like “reconciliation” may sound

¹³ “Critical” approaches to discourse “treat social practices, not just in terms of social relationships, but also in terms of their implication for things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods, and power” (Gee, 2004, p. 28).

¹⁴ Dan Linehan, “Remembering the 38 - Mankato memorial planned for those hanged in 1862 after Dakota War,” Mankato *Free Press*, March 4, 2012.

¹⁵ Dan Linehan, “New poem written for Dakota monument,” Mankato *Free Press*, March 8, 2012.

¹⁶ “The Goal is to Reconcile,” Mankato *Free Press*, March 11, 2012.

¹⁷ This definition follows theories of James Gee, Norman Fairclough, and other critical-discourse analysts who approach “discourse” as social practice. As Gee writes in *An Introduction to Discourse*

as if they accrete into a single discourse, individual utterances of the discourse mean something slightly different for every speaker; that discourses are therefore adaptable to changing times, situations, and speakers.¹⁸

“Reconcile,” the replacement poem now etched onto the new Mankato monument, provides a highly visible example of such discursive adaptability, subjecting reconciliation to nuance from the intersecting discourse of balance. Set up by a series of stanzas that remember “the innocent dead” on the one hand and “the guilty dead” on the other—“Both Dakota and white” and, alternately, “both white and Dakota”—the conclusion expresses

Hope for a future
When memories remain,
Balanced by forgiveness.¹⁹

There are certainly multiple ways to paraphrase this ending—the balancing of memories being a byproduct of forgiveness; the reconciled point of forgiveness being a means for one day achieving balanced memories—but to “Reconcile” changes here from “The Goal” of the sesquicentennial year²⁰ to a state attained with or on the way to another goal, namely, the fifty-fifty distribution of innocence and guilt among whites and Dakotas established in the poem’s dialectics. Considering fundamental memories that such an equalization seeks to eliminate—that Dakotas lived in the territory first; that treaties enabled whites to rob them of their homeland; that the Indian system, run by living, breathing white men was fundamentally corrupt and precipitated war²¹—the poem reads not as a series of artistic stanzas but as a list of imperative statements telling readers to remember in a certain way that involves a great deal of forgetting. Rather than “Balanced by forgiveness,” the poem means to end with “forgive and forget.” Nuanced this way by the discourse of balance, uncritical reconciliation runs exactly counter to critical reconciliation for its attempt to manipulate collective memory to the benefit of those who hold power.

The persuasiveness of the balance discourse in 2012 was striking. In a letter to the editor written months before December’s dedication ceremony, for example, when some locals feared the planned monument would be too one sided, an independent historian from New Ulm, John LaBatte, presented balance in a way closely related to that above, as an attempt to hold critical reconciliation in check: “Truth-telling and reconciliation require balance. To tell only one side is not balanced. To erect a monument only to the 38

Analysis: Theory and Method (2011), discourse means “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity (p. 201).

¹⁸ In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, V. N. Volosinov writes, “what is important for the speaker about a linguistic form is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign” (p. 68).

¹⁹ Dan Linehan, “New poem written for Dakota memorial,” *Mankato Free Press*, March 7, 2012.

²⁰ “The Goal is to Reconcile,” *Mankato Free Press*, March 11, 2012.

²¹ In *Lincoln and the Indians: Civil War Policy and Politics* (1978/2012) David Nichols critiques the fur trade, treaty, and annuity systems as “pathways to power” for political cronies. Nichols often points to nineteenth-century Minnesota for examples (pp. 5-24).

men who were hanged is not balanced. Therefore it is not truth-telling and not reconciliation.”²² Here, truth-telling would require, in instances where Dakota dead were being honored, an equal emphasis on the region’s uncommon but by no means unheard of story that in 1862 Indians rose up and killed many whites.²³ Tellingly, however, no such calls for balance came in 2012 when a commemorative plaque was going up in nearby Le Sueur, Minnesota, bearing only the names of whites who defended New Ulm from attack in 1862, six of whom died.²⁴ Nor have towns with monuments bearing only the names of white victims seen monuments go up with names of native victims in the spirit of balance.²⁵ In this instance, balance revealed itself as a situated discourse seeking to disrupt the critical politics of truth and reconciliation on the one hand while resisting acknowledgment of Dakota victims of violence in 1862 on the other, in particular those traditionally considered among the “hostiles.”²⁶ In short, balance posed a race-based double standard.

In 2012, balance gained legitimacy through many interweavings with supporting discourses like neutrality and objectivity. In an editorial column printed early in 2012, the *Free Press* evoked balance in a figurative way designed to prescribe a collective position of no position to a community poised to hear much about 1862 in the coming year:

While the plight of native Americans has clearly been horrific, there were also deep scars for the descendants of the hundreds of settlers who were killed in 1862. There is no great benefit in trying to weigh who was more at fault during the times that led up to and during the conflict ... Learning and discussing the facts, as best they can be found and as fairly as possible, should be the goal in this sesquicentennial year.²⁷

These remarks came in direct response to a public event held the previous week at a local college in which Dakota speakers had, according to the newspaper, spoken of forced assimilation to white culture, having their language suppressed and their spiritual practices outlawed into the 1970s. Through a metaphor of balance, this time of

²² John LaBatte, “Dedicate monument to all 1862 victims,” *Mankato Free Press*, April 16, 2012.

²³ Besides earlier American precedents like the Pequot War, the U.S.–Dakota War and the Mankato hanging have contemporary parallels in the Indian Rebellion of 1857 in Meerut India, and the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 in Jamaica, both of which were revolts against Anglo forms of colonialism ending in extraordinary show mass executions.

²⁴ Amanda Dyslin, “Marker dedicated to honor Le Sueur Tigers – Militia volunteers marched to New Ulm to aid settlers,” *Mankato Free Press*, August 20, 2012.

²⁵ New Ulm, for example, possesses a monument erected on the county courthouse lawn in 1949 which bears the names of many county residents who died in the 1862-3 violence, its stated purpose being “To pay homage to the sturdy pioneers who founded the territory of Minnesota a century ago. And to express veneration for the pioneers of Brown County and members of their families who lost their lives during the Sioux War of 1862-1863.” A new New Ulm monument dedicated in 2012 to the U.S.–Dakota War states rather meekly, “In Memory of All Who Suffered.” The back displays the names of artists and donors who contributed to the monument design and fundraising.

²⁶ Some markers and statues have been erected in the region to Little Crow who led the Dakota rebellion in 1862. So-called “friendlies” have seen some (but very little) representation on regional memorials as well. Morton, Minnesota, for example, possesses segregated obelisks erected in 1894, one bearing names of U.S. soldiers killed in battle, the other names six Dakotas who saved the lives of whites.

²⁷ “Dakota-U.S. War history should be learned,” *Mankato Free Press*, January 10, 2012.

“weighing” fault, the *Free Press* formulated another didactic proclamation of what “should be” on the interpretive front, like what “is to be” at Reconciliation Park, namely, a civic standard of suspending judgment in all forms.

In keeping with the promotion of this white public pedagogy of neutrality, various figures occupying professional educational posts in the community had much to say about their disavowals of judgment, or interpretive thought. The director of the Blue Earth County Historical Society, for instance, summed up her institution’s approach to the war by saying, “We’re not going to get into who was right and who was wrong. We’re trying to stay as neutral as we can.”²⁸ Neutrality sometimes implied an outright refusal to teach. One Mankato public-school teacher who takes his fifth-grade students to the hanging site every year, was quoted as saying, “When we teach history, we teach facts. All we can do is read them and then form your own opinion ... There’s no teaching.”²⁹ Similarly, the director of the Brown County Historical Society in New Ulm bluntly stated, “We can’t interpret the war. It’s just so complex.”³⁰ The demand for neutrality moved some white commentators to position themselves merely as apolitical displayers of perspectives, as the director of the Nicollet County Historical Society said in defense of his institution’s sesquicentennial activities: “I hope what people get out of this [anniversary] is there are lots of different perspectives. That doesn’t make someone right and someone else wrong —people just have differing perspectives about the same events.”³¹

What I have come to understand from the public pedagogy of neutrality—undergirded variously by discourses of balance, objectivity, complexity, and peaceful reconciliation depending on the speaker and the circumstances—is a significant degree of insecurity among whites about the potential outcomes of interpretive thought. The often repeated call not to weigh sides or to weigh them only in the light of universal equality, to collect the dots of objective fact but never to connect them, betrays the implicit knowledge that to do so would lead the white community to ask some embarrassing questions of itself, questions that could disrupt foundational beliefs about its own values and identity such as the entitlement to land and property ownership in southern Minnesota; notions of settler innocence, Christian victimhood and benevolence; notions of American justice, equality, and democracy through which the community has long taught itself, “the 150 years of myth making” that Waziyata Win refers to.

Finally, a few closing remarks are required about balance in order to better understand the public pedagogy that prevailed locally in 2012. Repeated calls for balance suggest assumptions are being made about an existing imbalance or one to come in the future. Often without saying so in a straightforward manner, the demand for balance provides political commentary on various ways of interpreting U.S. history that do not

²⁸ Brian Ojanpa, “Legacy grants include Dakota history,” *Mankato Free Press*, December 22, 2011.

²⁹ Brian Ojanpa, “To lend tangibility to U.S.–Dakota War history, see for yourself,” *Mankato Free Press*, September 9, 2012.

³⁰ Mark Fischenich, “Local history society gets a boost from legacy funds,” *Mankato Free Press*, January 28, 2012.

³¹ Tim Krohn, “Good guys, bad guys? History isn’t always so simple,” *Mankato Free Press*, August 12, 2012.

reflect well on settler society, Waziyata Win's 2008 book being a prime example. What some whites learn from studying 1862 in southern Minnesota is a history that seems to cut against the grain of critical pedagogies that teach about histories of oppression against racialized people. In the local case, whites sometimes come to understand that their people were the oppressed ones, the ones threatened with extermination when Indians ran them off "their" (the whites') land. However resistant this form of knowledge is to incorporating facts about, say, the white production of red "savagery," or colonized people's need to take up the tools of their colonizers to gain self-determination (Begaye, p. vii), or the multidirectional violence symptomatic of colonial histories (Rothberg, pp. 66-107), this white-settler politics of resentment is nevertheless a social fact that one must take into account when going public with the U.S.–Dakota War in southern Minnesota. So when the spokesperson for the Brown County Historical Society in New Ulm tells the media, "For us, it's got to be balanced,"³² the message is not one of fifty-fifty white/Dakota representation in his museum's exhibit but rather a message expressing an urgency to (re)tell stories of local atrocities against whites because they are presumably being forgotten with all the attention being paid to the suffering of Indians.³³ During the sesquicentennial period, this demand for balance found frequent expression in sensational letters to the editor bearing titles such as, "38 murderers don't deserve memorial,"³⁴ "A blond scalp is worth remembering also,"³⁵ and "Dakota got trials; what did their victims get?"³⁶ Often such letters invoke the settler terror of 1862. The second letter listed here, for example, engages the rape discourse that circulated wildly during the war:³⁷ "If another monument is put up, maybe you could hang that nameless girl's scalp on it. I'm sure her death was a lot more complicated than a drop from the gallows." In this political climate, to tip the scales toward "imbalance" by engaging critical interpretation could mean to incite face-to-face controversy with such a modern-day white defender.

Classroom Pedagogy of Fear

It was within the context of this fearful white public pedagogy of balance and neutrality that the St. Lucia College course "Conflict and Remembrance: The U.S.–Dakota War of 1862" was conducted. This four-week, January-term (J-term) course included a six-part lecture series, field trips to local historical sites, and the creation of the traveling museum exhibit I have mentioned. As participant-observer, I conducted and transcribed multiple interviews with instructors, students, and speakers; held weekly focus-group discussions attended by 9 of the 15 students enrolled; recorded daily field notes in the classroom; and collected course artifacts. Both instructors and all of the

³² Mark Fischenich, "Local History Society Gets a Boost from Legacy Funds," *Free Press*, January 28, 2012.

³³ New Ulm was brought under attack twice during the war and very nearly destroyed. Many whites from the area were killed.

³⁴ David J. Gray, Mankato *Free Press*, March 12, 2012.

³⁵ Paul A. Mueller, Mankato *Free Press*, March 19, 2012.

³⁶ John LaBatte, Mankato *Free Press*, March 23, 2012.

³⁷ Rumors of rape were so pervasive in 1862 that when reviewing records from the trials that saw 393 Dakota and Euro-Dakota men condemned to death for "murders and other outrages" (Chomsky, p. 23), President Lincoln initially sought only to uphold convictions of rape. Only two such cases were upheld (Wingerd, p. 319).

students willingly agreed to participate in my larger study. In accordance with the promise of anonymity, pseudonyms are applied to all participants, some of the place names, and the course and final project titles used in this presentation.

On the first day of class, students received a course syllabus stating that the “hope” in creating the museum exhibit was to “raise awareness of the treatment of indigenous people in the 19th century as white settlers poured into Minnesota.” They were told by the project lead, John Harwell, that the exhibit was already booked at local colleges, libraries, and historical societies through the year 2013. Themes for ten exhibit panels were listed on the syllabus, running from “Dakota Culture (Pre-Contact)” to “Commemoration and Reconciliation” with two panels positioned near the middle dedicated to the war: “War—Dakota perspectives” and “War—Settler perspectives.” Two representatives from the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) were on hand that first day to advise students on how to approach the topic with members of the community. As one might imagine, classroom talk that day was fraught with anxiety. The lead representative from MHS told students, “Creating 10 panels without much background knowledge gives me the hives.”³⁸ When one of the students said, “I’m white and I’m embarrassed I don’t know more,” the second visiting historian responded by confessing her own fears, saying, “This topic scares the crap out of me. People point fingers. It can be scary sometimes because people accuse you of being racist.”

In my first recorded conversation with co-instructor John Harwell,³⁹ director of the Day County Historical Society, I asked him about fears he might have had as project lead. On the one hand, he spoke with a sense of urgency about the exhibit and its scheduled showings, telling me, “This is a project that *has* to work.” On the other hand he expressed a fatalistic attitude toward political backlash from some Dakota people, saying, “I think this topic in particular is one where you—not only are there lots of thorny issues, but you cannot make everyone happy. Someone is going to hate you. It might be Angela Cavender Wilson, it might be John LaBatte. But someone, or both of them, are going to be very unhappy.”⁴⁰ When asked whether he was worried about backlash from whites too, he responded, “Absolutely. And I think we want to make sure in this exhibit that it does acknowledge that side and it’s not just a Dakota perspective to it.”

Employing a metaphor of balance, Harwell proceeded to explain his view of historiography as a pendulum that swings back and forth between Dakota and white sides over long periods. He acknowledged a history of white imbalance, saying, “for a long time we heard lots and lots and lots about the whites. And now I think we need to give more time for Dakota people to tell stories that they want to tell.” He expressed hope for a different orientation in the future however: “I hope that ultimately the pendulum swings to whoever writes this, uh, ‘Is this good history or not?’” Following the lead of University of Oklahoma historian Gary Clayton Anderson who had spoken to him about historical accuracy during a visit to St. Lucia College two weeks before this interview,

³⁸ Fieldnotes, January 3, 2012.

³⁹ Interview, January 20, 2012.

⁴⁰ Angela Cavender Wilson is Waziyata Win. John LaBatte is an independent historian from New Ulm who claims descent from both Dakotas and whites involved in the 1862 war. His views are revealed in part above. For Harwell, these two public figures represented opposite ends of a Dakota political spectrum.

Harwell forthrightly associated “good” history with white, male identity: “One thing he said, and I think he said this at dinner and you weren’t there, was, I hope we get to the point where we can write histories of the Dakota War and base it on good history and not who was writing them. Um, and as a white guy who writes about the Dakota War I can see where he’s coming from with that.” Embedded in these remarks lay a somewhat more polite form of the politics of resentment seen in the local newspaper. The discourse of balance renders critical reconciliation automatically inaccurate and in need of the counterbalancing weight of white objectivity that supposedly should be driving the pendulum. In terms only a bit less didactic than those applied by the *Free Press* editor, Harwell—a fellow “white guy” involved in public knowledge production—reserves the power to set the ideological parameters of display however much he feels he is currently making concessions to what “we need to give more time for.”

The Students

As mentioned, several of the 15 students expressed critical stances toward settler society in interviews. Some expressed the desire to write non-traditional exhibit panels that they hoped might disrupt the political status quo. For this presentation, I have chosen interview excerpts from three students who negotiated their panel texts with Harwell in different ways, contesting his advice, acquiescing to it, and making compromises that adjusted their critical voices to constraints exerted by the white public pedagogy of balance, neutrality, and fear I have described.

Jennifer

Jennifer was a second-year journalism major when she enrolled in the course. In my first interview with her two weeks in,⁴¹ she introduced herself as “far more radical than I think that you’re going to talk to anyone.” Laying out her view of Minnesota history, she said, “In terms of Dakota and white settler relations, um, I think that it was a genocide. I don’t know how many people are gonna, you know, *agree* with me. Some people aren’t. I know Gary Clayton Anderson certainly didn’t.⁴² Um, but in that regard I came into the class being far more sympathetic to the Dakota experience simply because, uh, white history has been taught to me my whole life. And this is the first time I’m even touching on it.”

While writing her exhibit panel, “Press and Panic on the Frontier,” Jennifer told me that if she could have it her way, she would “put way more responsibility on our government and on the white population on finding out what really happened, because a lot of the stuff I’m reading I think is bullcrap, to be honest.” At this point in the course, Jennifer had been openly expressing disagreement with Harwell about the notion of settler innocence. On her panel, she was trying to bring extermination discourses from frontier newspapers into juxtaposition with her thesis as she had stated it in her first draft: “Whatever perspective, all white settlers benefitted from the oppression of the Dakota

⁴¹ Interview, January 18, 2012.

⁴² On January 10, 2012, Anderson delivered a public lecture attended by the St. Lucia students. There he argued that what happened to the Dakota people in the 1860s amounted to ethnic cleansing rather than genocide as genocide is defined by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Anderson’s argument hinged on genocide not being written into official government policy in Minnesota.

people.” In his feedback to her, Harwell advised against using her own commentary, and suggested sticking to frontier newspaper headlines from 1862 instead: “you could get the ‘facts’ while keeping the flavor of fear, terror, + let’s face it – racism.”⁴³ He advised her to “frame” her panel according to statistics on population change and settler demographics. While Jennifer did eventually get to show real examples of the public call for extermination in 1862, her thesis against settler innocence did not make it onto her final exhibit panel.

As Jennifer laid out her critique of settler society in our first interview, she simultaneously expressed “optimism” that her “radical” view would change: “So I think that (2.0) uh (3.0) definitely, definitely is going to need far more balance in how I see it.” What’s striking in this comment is Jennifer’s omission of a personalized subject when speaking of the demand for balance. Rather than saying, “I think there should be” or “John expects me to show more balance in my panel,” the statement following the timed pauses suggests an assumed or naturalized standard of display at work, as well as an unnameable site of responsibility.

In my final interview with her in April,⁴⁴ Jennifer spoke proudly of the museum project’s success. Looking back on her initial radicalism, she made the strange comment, “I was a freak.” When I asked her about compromises she seemed to have made in the panel, she said, “Yeah, you know, if I’m gonna be honest, I wanted to go all the way with the panel, and I felt a lot of pressure from John to give the other side, because the rest of it is very one sided. And so, I mean, in wanting to have it be balanced I think that was what was, you know, wanting to happen, but I feel like if I was gonna go all the way we should have just gone all the way and just done it.” Evoking the demand for balance three months after our first interview, Jennifer again depersonalizes the subject, “that was what was, you know, wanting to happen,” a peculiar phrasing that neutralizes responsibility for the politics of white balance as it also speaks to a highly naturalized or normative standard for representation being in play.

Stacy

At the time of our first interview,⁴⁵ Stacy was a fourth-year Gender Studies major. A few years older than the average senior at St. Lucia, Stacy told me she had spent time in the past providing daycare to families on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, not as a missionary, she pointed out, but as a volunteer working with fellow Baha’i spiritualists. She said this experience “has definitely given me a perspective that is greater than what the general white perspective is. Since I was a kid, and my parents can testify to this, I’ve always wanted to, regardless of what I know about the situation, wanted to stand on the side of the oppressed.”

⁴³ Headlines Harwell proposed were ones of Dakota attacks and white military victories. In his feedback to Jennifer, he wrote, “you could do ‘Lower Sioux Attacked,’ ‘Soldiers Ambushed at Ferry,’ ‘Dakota repelled at New Ulm,’ ‘Terrible Atrocity to Some Poor Yankee,’ ‘Defeated at Wood Lake,’ and finally ‘Camp Release.’ You could frame it with a few opening sentences about population change, general nativity of settlers” (‘Euro-American perspectives,’ panel draft, January 12, 2012).

⁴⁴ Interview, April 26, 2012.

⁴⁵ Interview, January 23, 2012.

Even though she was not from Minnesota and claimed not to know about the local public pedagogy regarding the war, Stacy revealed an awareness of a demand for balance: “so people could be very upset about what appears to be imbalance in how we are portraying, through the quotes that we’re using and the images that we’re using, um, what the settlers and the traders and the government officials were like.” Despite this anxiety, Stacy’s panel, “Exile of the Dakota People,” managed to include some of the hardest hitting material of the exhibit, for instance, the military’s killing of innocent Dakota people in Dakota Territory after 1862, the deaths of hundreds of Dakotas under removal to the Crow Creek Reservation, and a particularly vengeful statement made by government agent Thomas Galbraith in 1863 who called for beating, killing, and starving the Dakota people into submission.

Unlike Jennifer, Stacy reported no disagreements with Harwell in writing her panel narrative. For Stacy, spiritual considerations made it easy to conform to a relativistic view toward justice being promoted in the classroom. “It’s not all Star Wars,” Harwell had said during the second week of class. “There are good and bad people everywhere. This may not seem to be the case with people like Ramsey and Sibley who seem like pretty evil guys.⁴⁶ Still, not everything they did was evil.”⁴⁷ In line with this thinking, Stacy said, “for me, it’s about how do we move forward and recognize the humanity in all of us, that we’re all noble beings. Um, and that we *all* have good hearts. Even the people who are the oppressors have good hearts. That’s the perspective that I come from.”

In accordance with this moral relativism, Stacy’s panel narrative focuses on collective subjects like “Congress” and “the government.” When presented with opportunities to tell of the real violence involved in removal, a long string of passive sentences emerges to sanitize the history, erasing any specific acting agents and, thereby, responsibility:

They were forced into an internment camp at Fort Snelling where hundreds died. The men were kept at a similar camp in Mankato. In May of 1863 nearly all the Dakota people were permanently removed from Minnesota. Only a few hundred Dakota were allowed to remain in Minnesota because of the assistance they offered the settlers during the war.

Of the nineteen sentences in Stacy’s narrative, thirteen hinge on passive constructions. Other sentences show either ambiguous subjects or stative verbs or conditions, such as “The government believed ...” and “...the descendants of the Minnesota Dakota reside ...”, etc.

⁴⁶ On September 9, 1862, Governor Alexander Ramsey proclaimed “The Sioux Indians of Minnesota must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the state” (Folwell, p. 255). General Henry Hastings Sibley promised Ramsey during the fighting that he “would sweep them with the besom of death” (Bessler, p. 38).

⁴⁷ Fieldnotes, January 11, 2012.

Stephanie

Stephanie was a third-year Psychology major at the time of our first interview.⁴⁸ She had completed previous coursework focusing on racism and native-American history and had already read one of the books on the syllabus, Ella Deloria's *Waterlily* (1988). Coming into the course, Stephanie expressed a deep interest in learning about modern Dakota life in Minnesota as reported on a course entry questionnaire.⁴⁹ Like Stacy, she had only lived in Minnesota a short time before the start of the course and expressed a prior lack of awareness that some whites in the region still carried anger about what had happened to their ancestors in the war of 1862. "I was coming in on the side of the Dakota," she told me, "like angry at white settlers." After learning of the anger expressed by some settler descendants, her critical voice moved her to say, "It's not fair that you feel that way ... You guys are here and you have land and you have freedom that the Dakota people will never get to have."

In drafting her exhibit panel, "The Dakota Declare War," Stephanie experienced a considerable amount of discontent with how Harwell was advising her. Optimistic about the stated hope on the syllabus to "raise awareness of the treatment of indigenous people," Stephanie grew troubled after Harwell redefined the purpose of her panel one day in class by saying, "With this panel we want to present how the Dakota carried out attacks strategically."⁵⁰ Paired with a fellow student who was a veteran of the recent war in Iraq and who willingly took up this redefined goal, Stephanie felt she had little chance to include information about a perspective she felt was missing altogether from the exhibit, that of Dakota women and children affected by the war.

When I asked her who could possibly be offended by the content of the panel she was co-writing, Stephanie was quick to answer "Dakota people." "Because it downplays the injustice?" I asked. "Yeah!" she answered, "Oh my god! They're gonna look at my panel and they're gonna say, 'Here's 200 words representing how *my* people felt about, you know, fifty years of injustice, and, you know, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of dead, sick children and women that aren't even mentioned?' So we were talking about putting our names on them. I was like, 'Yeah, that'd be fine,' and then I was like, 'Wait, everyone ever is gonna hate me.'" While various reasons certainly led to the fifteen students agreeing as a group not to have their names or signatures printed onto the final exhibit panels, Stephanie forthrightly explained that she could not endorse the content of the panel she helped to create.

When I followed up with Stephanie in the spring,⁵¹ the story she told let me know that the fears she had related back in January were well founded. Presenting her panel at a social-justice conference at St. Lucia College in March had brought her into conflict with a descendant of the Dakota leader Little Crow, a woman who, as Stephanie told it, took her to task for saying that Little Crow declared war in 1862. Stephanie paraphrased the woman's words: "Don't pin this on him. He was our—he's our hero and he's a great

⁴⁸ Interview, January 24, 2012.

⁴⁹ Pre-test, "Conflict and Remembrance: The U.S.-Dakota War of 1862," January 3, 2012.

⁵⁰ Fieldnotes, January 9, 2012.

⁵¹ Interview, April 27, 2012.

leader and he wasn't picking a fight.'" Stephanie continued, "And I was like, 'No, no,' you know, 'that's not what...' She was really really upset because, you know, he's her ancestor and she's very offended. And it was, you know like just the total disappointment that I have with the panel and having her like express that disappointment to me. So I just like burst into tears. I was like (crying voice) 'I'm really sorry!'"

While Stephanie resisted the way the drafting of the panel was being taught in class, that teaching still had influence on how she positioned herself later when attempting to account for the panel's content in public with the foregrounding of a militarism she did not care about. On the surface, it would appear that Stephanie retained a certain degree of responsibility for her panel at this point nearly two months after the J-term course had ended. After all, she still seemed willing to "stand by it" in a literal sense and face the community. But the workshop offered an opportunity to do what she had wanted to do all along, get to know Dakota people, an experience her panel threatened to turn into a profoundly negative experience. By blaming this initially negative encounter on her panel rather than on the words that came out of her own mouth, Stephanie sums up everything the panel-writing process had taught her, that is, how to speak against her own judgment. As Dakota public intellectuals had put it during J-term lectures and discussions, Stephanie had been advised against "speaking from the heart."⁵²

Conclusion

The title to this presentation suggested I would identify educative barriers to restorative justice in Dakota homeland. The most salient barrier to the development of social-justice orientations in the J-term at St. Lucia College stemmed from a widespread belief among people living in southern Minnesota that since Indians killed a large number of whites in 1862, all people must have suffered equally in the region's past, a notion that speaks more to present-day Minnesotans' ideals about equality than it does to the actual racial inequality on which the state was founded. Because of the supposedly uncommon degree of white victimhood regionally, any responsible teaching of the U.S.-Dakota War must balance sides rather than speak honestly about power, colonialism, and what can happen when one ethnic group racializes another, in this case to dispossess them of their land and resources. What I hope this presentation has shown is that today's apolitical balancer of sides — the white educator with the institutional backing needed to produce public knowledge about the U.S.-Dakota War — can be far from disinterested. On the contrary, when asked, the neutral provider of perspectives revealed his raced and gendered identity and the "good" value of objectivity that allegedly flows from it.

Much more can be said about the uncomfortable and highly ambivalent positions this privileged identity placed the St. Lucia students in when they were performing their museum exhibit work in 2012. Most troubling, I think, was the way in which speaking out against colonialism and oppression was perceived as speaking against the interests of the community *and* its modern liberal-arts institution. As Jennifer put it in our first interview:

⁵² The importance of speaking from the heart was emphasized by Glenn Wasicuna in his j-term-series lecture "A Dakota Way of Life," delivered January 5, 2012. Sheldon Wolfchild made a similar appeal when speaking to the students during their visit to the Lower Sioux Community (Fieldnotes, January 19, 2012).

Who am I more wary to, you know, who am I stepping around because I don't want to step on their toes? It's white people. And, you know, and it's the children of white people. Yeah. I don't know what would be appropriate to say, you know, what do you do? You know, do you say go ahead and do something more radical and then screw St. Lucia College? Screw anything else from ever happening in the future? You know, screw any kind of exhibits like this? Screw any kind of education? Huh? What's right? I have no idea.

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