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## “YOU’VE HEARD IT NOW:” TRAVELING THROUGH STORIES WHILE TEACHING INDIGENOUS STUDIES AT A POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY IN CALIFORNIA’S CENTRAL COAST

This one just told them to listen:  
“What I have is a story.”

.....  
Okay  
go ahead  
laugh if you want to  
but as I tell the story  
it will begin to happen.

--Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

In *The Truth About Stories* (2003), Thomas King uses the story of a greedy Coyote winding up all the feathers from the Ducks as a preface to his discussion of U.S. and Canada legislations to dispossess Natives from their lands and “legalize” them out of existence. He writes:

While the Ducks do give up all their large feathers, the new feathers that grow in are much smaller, and they don’t shimmer quite so much and they don’t glow quite as brightly as before, and Coyote leaves the Ducks alone for the moment as he looks around for more valuable acquisitions.

With Native people, while our land base was drastically reduced in the early years of treaty making, that erosion has slowed. Even stopped in some areas. Mind you, we don’t have much land left, but feathers are feathers. And even if all the large ones are gone, after a while, Coyote is going to come back, looking for the smaller ones. For he has an insatiable appetite.  
(129)

What a perfect story for the sad ending of the Standing Rock water protectors resistance, who, after months of opposition to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, were forced to evacuate the camps, marched out by North Dakota authorities. Writing for *The Guardian* on the day of the evacuation ultimatum, Julian Brave NoiseCat states:

On these hallowed grounds, history tends to repeat itself. In 1890, police murdered Sitting Bull on the Standing Rock reservation out of suspicion that he was preparing to lead the Ghost Dance movement in an uprising. Two weeks later the United States Cavalry massacred more than three hundred Lakota at Wounded Knee. Over 126 years later, the characters and details of the stories that animate this landscape have changed, but the Cowboys and Indians remain locked in the same grim dance. (“Standing Rock is Burning”)

Ironically, in the story of Coyote and the Ducks, the ducks, who continue to be baffled by Coyote’s offer to protect them from ill-intentioned humans, ask: “Eat us? [...] Human Beings eat Ducks? [...] But then who will sing for them? [...] Who will dance for them? Who will remind them of their relationship with the earth?” (125). Such impasse in the story between the world of the ducks—a world made of cohesion, collaboration, and balance—and the Western world—characterized by fierce competition and a hierarchical order— still drives

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the politics of the U.S. government toward its Indigenous Peoples.<sup>1</sup> “The eviction of Oceti Sakowin from their treaty lands,” Brave NoiseCat reminds us, “forces us to confront another foundational injustice, one rarely if ever discussed in contemporary politics—colonialism” (“Standing Rock is Burning”). Standing Rock might be burning, as Brave NoiseCat writes, but the Indigenous resistance for life, land, and sovereignty continues. And so does our work in the classroom.

“Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous,” King writes (2003, 9). They have the power to make and unmake the world, as Leslie Silko powerfully reminds us in *Ceremony*. And they can control our lives, as King asserts. Starting from these tenets, I would like to offer, in what follows, a few reflections on my own personal journey with Native American literature and the way in which I use the power of stories in the classroom as a means for students to decolonize some of the Eurocentric tenets of Western education. Specifically, I will focus on King’s *The Truth About Stories* as a text that exemplifies Walter Mignolo’s notion of “border thinking,” and one that challenges students to open up to “a world in which many worlds would coexist” (2011, 275).

### 1. Traveling Through Stories

As a student of American Literature in my native Italy in the early 1990s, I was attracted to the repository of oral knowledges and submerged history that the novels of the Native American Renaissance presented to me. The epistemological challenges of N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and Silko’s *Ceremony* had a profound impact on my intellectual growth and triggered my determination to embark upon the journey that would determine the course of my adult life. Thanks to a Fulbright scholarship, I was able to pursue my M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in English at the University of New Mexico.<sup>2</sup> The knowledge and wisdom of the late Louis Owens, novelist, scholar, and outstanding professor, guided me through those graduate school years, and I will forever treasure our endless conversations about Native literature, mixed-blood identity, critical theory, and Americans’ fascination with *indianness*. It was Louis who first introduced me to the intricacy (and traps) of essentialism and to the endless debate on identity politics, which, in my case, translated into the question of being an outsider yet wanting to join the academic conversation on American ethnic literatures. Owens himself struggled his entire life with questions of identity and authenticity, the pain of that struggle powerfully explored in all his work, fiction and non-fiction. Moreover, he made me appreciate the pungent humor of Thomas King’s writing, who, all the more ironically, perhaps, in *The Truth About Stories* reflects on Louis’s tragic death and uses *his* story as a prelude into a discussion of Native literature and cultural paradigms. He writes: “Over the years, I’ve lost more than my fair share of friends to suicide. The majority of them have been mixed-bloods. Native men and women who occupied those racial shadow zones that have been created for us and that we create for ourselves. The latest and greatest loss was the Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish writer Louis Owens, who killed himself in an airport parking garage on his way to an academic conference in Bellingham, Washington” (92). We will never know the reasons that brought Louis to that desperate, ultimate gesture in the summer of 2002. Whatever it was, King suggests, it was a story he must have believed in (2003, 95).

Upon completion of my Ph.D. in Spring 2002, I moved temporarily to Switzerland, having been offered a non-tenure track position in the English department at the University of Geneva. For four years, I taught courses in Native American literature and postcolonial theory and literatures, and I was challenged by an incredible

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I use the term ‘Native’ and ‘Indigenous’ interchangeably. While the term Native refers primarily to peoples in the United States, the term Indigenous has acquired a more global dimension following the United Nations debates leading to the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. As for the term ‘Peoples’ (plural) my usage reflects the international legal principle according to which only “peoples,” vis-à-vis people or minorities, have the right to self-determination. For further discussion, see the introductory chapter to my edited volume *Indigenous Rights in the Age of the UN Declaration*.

<sup>2</sup> I owe a note of thanks to Professor Mario Corona, formerly of the University of Bergamo, who first inspired me to navigate the routes that would take me, from Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, to Native America, the Caribbean, and beyond. I obtained my Laurea in Lingue e letterature straniere in 1993 from the University of Messina, after writing a thesis on N. Scott Momaday. I thank Professor Giuseppe Lombardo, at the University of Messina, for encouraging me to pursue my interests in Native American Studies via the Fulbright.



group of intelligent, young students who, in the mountainous landscape of their small landlocked country, were able to imagine the extraordinary colors of a New Mexico mesa at sunrise, explore the complexities of Laguna-Pueblo cosmology, and wrestle with the radical imagination of Gerald Vizenor's trickster universe.<sup>3</sup> Following this European parenthesis, academia brought me back to the United States and to a professorship in the Ethnic Studies Department at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly), where I have been teaching since 2006. I was excited to have found, finally, a department that would allow me to pursue my growing interdisciplinary interests and explore on-site the complexity of U.S. racial formation.

Situated in the coastal town of San Luis Obispo, halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, Cal Poly, with a student population of 21,306 (Fall 2016), is part of the 23-campus California State University system. Guided by a 'learn-by-doing philosophy' that prepares students for a hands-on educational experience, it frequently ranks high in the overall list of the West's best universities.<sup>4</sup> Cal Poly's mission emphasizes the role of a 'comprehensive' university, one that "provides a balanced education in the arts, sciences, and technology, while encouraging cross-disciplinary and co-curricular experiences" ("The University"). Within the campus community as a whole, the Office of University Diversity and Inclusivity (OUDI) has been established to enhance the campus climate by fostering diversity and educational equity in all aspects of the university life.

Does Cal Poly have a diversity problem, Coyote would pointedly ask? Well, so it seems.

Campus publications data for fall 2016 report that 16.0% of students "identify themselves as Hispanic/Latino, and 12.6% identify themselves as Asian American" (Cal Poly View). An additional category named Under Represented Minority (URM) include students who self-report their race/ethnicity as Hispanic, Native American, African American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or multi-racial including at least one of those four groups" (Cal Poly View). The proportion for the URM students enrolled in undergraduate degrees in fall 2016 was 19.5 %, but upon looking at each of the above-mentioned ethnic/racial groups, we notice that the percentages are significantly low: 0.7% for African Americans and 0.1% for Native Americans and Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders respectively. The extremely low numbers for Native Americans is even more puzzling upon considering that the Santa Ynez Indian Reservation, comprising members of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians (the only federally-recognized Chumash tribe in the nation) is located in the Santa Barbara county, 65 miles south of San Luis Obispo (Santa Ynez). With this kind of scenario, readers might ask what exactly is the role of Ethnic Studies at Cal Poly. And how does its faculty, myself included, approach the teaching of race in a predominantly white campus?<sup>5</sup>

I remember being asked exactly 'the race teaching question' during my campus interview. Whatever I responded, I must have convinced the search committee of the role that I could play in the Ethnic Studies department, but little did I know about the challenges ahead. Besides the racial challenge, there was another factor I had not quite considered fully when I accepted the position. Upon arriving at Cal Poly from the University of Geneva, I found myself facing the task of teaching literary texts and theories of race and ethnicity to a "polytechnic" undergraduate student population who often take ethnic studies courses to fulfill a

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<sup>3</sup> When my contract with the English Department at the University of Geneva expired, at the end of my third year, I accepted a one-year position at the University of Lausanne where I offered courses on Native American and Anglophone Caribbean literatures.

<sup>4</sup> In 2017, U.S. News & World Report's America's Best Colleges guidebook ranked Cal Poly once again No. 1 public, master's-level university in the West with the colleges of Engineering, Architecture, and Business leading the way in students' top degree choices ("Cal Poly Report").

<sup>5</sup> Evolving from the Ethnic Studies Program, the Ethnic Studies Department at Cal Poly was established in 2006 with the goal "to humanize and thicken the ingredients of scientific method, process, and ends" ("From Ethnic Studies"). A small department offering students a B.A. degree in Comparative Ethnic Studies (CES) and a Minor in Ethnic Studies, it currently lists six tenured faculty, two tenure-track, and two lectures, all teaching a wide range of courses on the cultures and histories of Indigenous, African, Latino/a, and Asian peoples in the United States within a global and postcolonial context. As for the student population, there are currently forty-five student majors and 31 minors, making it one of the smallest, yet most racially diverse, departments on campus.



General Education (GE) and/or a United States Cultural Pluralism (USCP) requirement.<sup>6</sup> Gone were the days when I could simply walk into a classroom and expect students to begin discussing the literature by the Native authors I had assigned, appreciating the writer's skillful manipulation of language and/or the intricacy of the Native universe unfolding in these stories. But I could not blame Cal Poly students. The majority of these students taking Ethnic Studies classes, in fact, were/are not literature majors. They are engineers, architects, business, and environmental science majors among others. In the specific case of courses focusing on Indigenous Studies, my students have little to no knowledge of the history of the relationship between the United States and its Indigenous Nations and/or the legal-judicial situation of the 567 federally recognized American Indian tribes. These same students are not familiar with the history and significance of the treaties, neither are they aware of the on-going legal battles that Native communities are fighting to protect their inherent right to sovereignty and self-determination.

What to do then? How to present the content and contexts of literary works produced by Native American and Indigenous authors? How to explain the quintessential tenet, which is true of any literature, that "meaning," as King says, "is refracted by cosmology" (2003, 112)?

## 2. Storytelling in the classroom

I began to consider adjustments to my teaching strategies that would facilitate students' learning. I balanced these adjustments with a determination to help Cal Poly students understand the benefits of a liberal arts education in our increasingly global and transnational world. More importantly, I wanted students to open up to differing worldviews and epistemologies mindful of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's warning on "the danger of a single story."<sup>7</sup> One of the core courses in the Ethnic Studies curriculum, and one that also fulfills a GE requirement, is a survey course on Indigenous Studies, *ES 241*, an interdisciplinary exploration of the social, political, economic, legal, and cultural institutions of American Indian, Native Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian peoples within a transnational and global context. It took me years to shape this course to the format in which I currently teach it,<sup>8</sup> but insisting on having students read/analyze some literature from the onset was probably the wisest decision I could make and one that ended up in a most rewarding experience despite a few bumps along the way.

In a ten-week quarter course, I usually assign *The Truth About Stories* around week five, after students have become familiar with the history of federal Indian policy, the contemporary legal-judicial status of Indigenous Nations as well as notions of sovereignty and self-determination. We spend an entire two-hour class discussing King's book in the context of 'literature, storytelling, and survival.' I start asking students to define 'narrative' and apply this definition to the subtitle of the book, "A Native Narrative." I don't necessarily follow a specific chapter-by-chapter order in leading the book discussion, mindful of a colleague's warning that "the book teaches itself."<sup>9</sup> I have often wondered about such a statement as I have been trying, over the years, to find the best pedagogical approach to engage students in meaningful conversations. Whether I assign small

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<sup>6</sup> As of fall 2016, Cal Poly has 63 Bachelor's Degrees and 34 Master's Degrees. Only five of the MA degrees are offered by the College of Liberal Arts (Cal Poly-Academic).

<sup>7</sup> First presented as a Ted talk in 2009, Ngozi Adichie highlights the risk of cultural and critical misunderstanding if we frame our opinions about people and/or nations based only and exclusively on one single story.

<sup>8</sup> Readings for this course include mostly chapters from *Native American Voices: A Reader* (2010), edited by Susan Lobo, Steve Talbot, and Taci L. Morris. Additional chapters have been added from the following books: *Why You Can't Teach United States History Without American Indians* (2015), *Nations to Nations: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations* (2014), *The Winona La Duke Reader* (2002), Winona La Duke's *The Militarization of Indian Country* (2013), and *A Nation Rising: Hawaiian Movements for Life, Land, and Sovereignty* (2014). Students also watch two films: *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *A Thousand Roads* (2004), directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho). The course ends with a discussion of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and a brief introduction to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UDRIP).

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to John Purdy, former editor of *Studies in American Indian Literatures* (SAIL) and Emeritus Professor at Western Washington University, Bellingham, for such precious advice on teaching King's book.





group discussion questions, or have a few students lead a larger classroom discussion, students, to my surprise, do find their way into the book and into the heart of King's message: stories shape the world and they are indeed "all we are" (2003, 2). Such powerful tenet drives students as they engage in a passionate comparative reading/analysis of King's retelling of the Haudenosaunee creation story of Sky Woman, or the Woman Who Fell from the Sky in King's version, and the quintessential Western/Christian account of Genesis. In calling attention to the Western privileging of written narratives over oral ones, King makes the Haudenosaunee story tribally unspecific by labeling it a 'Native' creation story and calling the woman 'Charm.' He does not take such liberty with the Christian Creation story. In Genesis, God is God. Period. Moreover, King comments on how, in re-telling the biblical story, he has tried "to maintain a sense of rhetorical distance and decorum while organizing the story for a knowledgeable gathering" (22). King's criticism of Western colonial narratives does not get lost among students. They begin to question why, for instance, they have never heard of Charm, but are well acquainted with Adam and Eve.<sup>10</sup> More significantly, they are able to use King's comparative lens to explain the different worldviews shaped by these stories. As one student points out, in response to my question of how King's narratives might position Native peoples in relationship to the European encounter,

While the Native story has themes of cooperation, sharing, and organization, the Biblical story is rooted in strict rules that can lead to punishment if broken. There is a system of higher and lower class between god, humans, plants/animals. In the native story, the animals are able to find a system of social cohesion where they can live life as equals. It is because of these two different types of teachings that one might find a clash of cultures between Indigenous people [sic] and those of European origins.

Suddenly the history that these students have been learning throughout the first weeks of classes comes alive. If, until now, notions of differing epistemologies appeared rather abstract, all the more so in trying to comprehend key tenets in traditional ecological knowledge beyond romantic clichés and stereotypical views of Indians' reverence for "mother earth,"<sup>11</sup> the two stories clearly articulate the quintessential worldviews that have shaped the Native-European encounter. "When Europeans came and conquered and stole property and land," a student writes, "they did so with the mindset that they were superior and had more of a right to everything due to their 'civility.'" The biblical story emphasizes "devotion, deference, and understanding of social standing," while the Native story "emphasizes different strengths of individuals and overall equality," this same student remarks. As the class ponders more on such philosophical tenets, students, prompted by King's suggestion, boldly envision an alternative to the set-in-stone narrative we have been given in our Christian, monological narrative. King writes: "What if the creation story in Genesis had featured a flawed deity who was understanding and sympathetic rather than autocratic and rigid? [...] What if the animals had decided on their own names? What if Adam and Eve had simply been admonished for their foolishness? [...] What kind of world might we have created with that kind of story" (27-8)? By considering the prospect of a less hierarchical worldview, similar to the balanced world constructed by Charm and her fellow animals, students open up to what critics Boaventura de Sousa Santos, João Arriscado Nunes, and Maria Paula Menese call "an ecology of knowledges," a system in which different kinds of knowledges are granted "an equality of opportunities" in the hope to build "a more democratic and just society" (2007, xx).

From Latin America, Asia, and Africa the invitation has come, over the past few decades, to consider alternative perspectives to the counter-hegemonic forces of globalization by embracing differing categories of thought and knowledges. In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011), Walter D. Mignolo references the Aymara expression *suma kamaña*, a concept conveying the Andean cosmovision of "[living] in harmony,

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<sup>10</sup> The selected students' comments I hereby present are based on my *ES 241: Survey of Indigenous Studies* course, taught this past Winter quarter (2017). While such observations are not, of course, intended to be representative of any significant quantitative data for the course, they do however reflect a consistency in students' response to King's text, based on my experience in teaching this book over the last five years or so at Cal Poly.

<sup>11</sup> I expand later on the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and its relevance to Indigenous Studies classes at Cal Poly.



[and] in the complementation of the different worlds of eco-biotic natural community” to articulate a form of cosmopolitanism from below deeply grounded on distinctive indigenous cosmologies and epistemologies from the Americas (307).<sup>12</sup> It is only by re-claiming these epistemologies that the West has attempted to suppress in its imperialistic design to affirm “a monoculture of scientific knowledge” (De Sousa Santos, Arricado Nunes, and Menese 2007, xx) that we can promote, Mignolo argues, following the Zapatista formula, “a pluriverse of decolonial cosmopolitanism” (2011, 273). Border/decolonial thinking, Mignolo maintains, invites a re-affirmation of those “forms of knowledge and ways of being” that have been marginalized, when not altogether suppressed, by imperial epistemology (206). In the context of a classroom setting such as my *Survey of Indigenous Studies*, King’s narrative proves to be particularly illuminating in engaging students in various forms of Mignolo’s ‘decolonial project.’

As King winds the stories of his narrative, from personal and familial past to central cultural figures such as Edward Curtis, Will Rogers, historical figures such as Ishi, and to literary authors such as Owens, he invites students to consider a new story about Native peoples and to relate themselves differently to a history that has repeatedly fashioned the invention of the *indian* while denying the presence of living, present-day Native Americans.<sup>13</sup> By the time the class discussion gets to the last chapter of the book and to the story of Coyote and the Ducks, the history of federal Indian policy appears less as something to generate guilt and/or shame among students (especially white students) and more as a warning not to repeat it in the future.<sup>14</sup>

King’s repetitive ending at the end of each chapter in *The Truth About Stories* invites students to apply the content of his book to what they have been learning throughout the course. With slight modification of the subject matter, each chapter in King’s narrative ends with a reference to the predominant story we have heard and with King’s persistent invitation: “Take [this story], for instance. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to your children. Turn it into a play. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (151). The following is a list of sample responses from students in my class as they confront King’s predicaments on the truth about stories:

“King emphasizes that we can learn a lot from stories and that they do have the power to change us. When he says the last line, he is calling us to action and even attaching some sense of personal responsibility for us to share these stories with others either through retelling or living out what we have learned.”

“The way society is today does have resonances in these stories and it appears he’s calling us to start looking at things differently. Even if we try to forget the story, we have heard it [...] and however we interpret it, we will have new insights.”

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<sup>12</sup> Mignolo’s translation of *suma kamaña* draws from Aymara sociologist Simon Yampara, who counters the mis-appropriation of such term as mere “development” by financial agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank, which Mignolo envisions as “projects of re-westernization” (2011, 307).

<sup>13</sup> Throughout his oeuvre, Gerald Vizenor has forcefully critiqued the invention of the term *indian*, which he insists on writing lowercase and italicized, calling it “a colonial enactment . . . [a] simulation that has superseded real tribal names (1999, 11).

<sup>14</sup> I should point out that the notions of ‘white guilt’ and ‘white privilege’ generate uncomfortable reactions among Cal Poly white students, often resulting in forms of ‘resistance’ toward ethnic studies courses. Lacking the knowledge of the colonial/imperial history of the United States, a history that is too superficially addressed in their earlier education, students arrive at taking courses in college completely unprepared to deal with such sensitive issues. In my *ES 241* course, for instance, some students get defensive when the issue of genocide is brought up. They tend to dismiss the comparison between the American and the Nazi genocide as too “extreme” or “exaggerated,” despite compelling arguments offered by the assigned readings including essays that analyze in detail how the definition presented in the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide is applicable in the Americas. Similarly, some students react in disbelief upon learning the colonial history resulting in the military overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom and illegal annexation of the islands and often feel ‘offended’ by provocative texts such as Haunani-Kay Trask’s *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii* (1993).



“I think [King] exemplifies this idea of not being able to unlearn what you’ve been told. Although there are many fallacies in the stories we have been told about our history, it is clear that it is never too late to learn the true story. And once you learn something, it can never be unlearned.”

“He puts the weight of the stories on his readers’ shoulders, saying that we have the power of these stories now, and we can choose what to do with them. Readers and students can take from this warning the consequences of the story, that they can either forget this story and know how the existing stories can shape reality, or they can live their [ lives] with their newfound knowledge.”

“You can forget what you hear or read or think, but once heard, read, or thought you can no longer go through life ignorant of the idea you were presented with. If you do then you cannot complain when there comes a time that the story or idea is relevant and real and you no longer possess the knowledge to deal with it.”

I consider these responses one of the most powerful moments of the course showing, as they do, students’ clear understanding of the responsibility that comes with newfound knowledge. While subscribing to King’s approach of telling a story, not preach (2003, 26), I try in my classes to let students gradually discover their path toward “a pluriversity of knowledges,” the quintessential condition, Mignolo reminds us, to achieve a truly “cosmopolitan world order” (2011, 208-9).

It’s difficult to predict what my students are going to do with the newfound knowledge acquired in *ES 241*. Will they forget it, entirely dismiss it, or will they instead think of ways in which they might live their lives differently in the future? In the current political climate the United States is living, one in which ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ are increasingly becoming the new stories presented as ‘truth,’ I can only remind students, regardless of their major, to keep returning to stories, to undertake the challenge to hearing, learning, and retelling the stories that make us human. As one student put it, “The end of King’s coyote and the duck story is extremely powerful and reads: ‘No more Ducks. But then who will sing for us? Who will dance for us? Who will remind us of our relationship to the earth?’” (2003, 150). Not only do we run the risk of losing ourselves, should the stories be forgotten, but we also risk losing our responsibility toward the earth—our duty and obligation, to make the earth, as the Haudenosaunee/Iroquois wisely advised, a safe place seven generations into the future.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. By Way of Conclusion

By way of Conclusion, I would like to offer readers a story that, though not directly related to my *ES 241* or my teaching of King’s *The Truth About Stories*, is a perfect representation of the kind of epistemological challenges that King’s stories enact in Western college curricula and of the possibilities to open up to differing systems of knowing.

Since 2013, Cal Poly has been offering a new Minor to its student population. Titled “Indigenous Studies in Natural Resources and the Environment” (INRE), this minor aims to bring together both the tenets of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and western science. As described by Robin Wall Kimmerer, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), which is not unique to Native American cultures, “is born of long intimacy and attentiveness to a homeland and can arise wherever people are materially and spiritually integrated with their landscape” (2002, 433). Long considered the ‘intellectual twin to science,’ though historically marginalized, TEK, the author further notes, “is increasingly being sought by academics, agency scientists, and policymakers as a potential source of ideas for emerging models of ecosystem management,

<sup>15</sup> Commonly known as the Seventh Generation principle, such quintessential tenet of Haudenosaunee/Iroquois philosophy dates back to the creation of the Great Law of Peace, which still functions as the Six Nations Confederacy’s constitution. As stated in the Confederacy’s website, “The nations of the Haudenosaunee believe that we borrow the earth from our children’s children and it is our duty to protect it and the culture for future generations. All decisions made now are made with the future generations who will inherit the earth in mind” (“Haudenosaunee Confederacy”).



conservation biology, and ecological restoration” (432). Based on a twenty-year collaboration between the departments of Ethnic Studies and Natural Resources Management and Environmental Sciences with the goal of promoting TEK at Cal Poly, the INRE minor constitutes a further example in a nationwide trend toward integrating cutting edge scholarship from differing epistemological orientations.<sup>16</sup> As envisioned by the founding faculty members,

Integration of Indigenous and western science into university curricula and professional disciplines could lead to enhanced collaboration and stewardship of public and tribal lands. Cal Poly’s new Indigenous Studies in Natural Resources and the Environment (INRE) minor works to foster communication and collaboration across academic disciplines and programs by helping people better understand and respect the land, natural resources, and ecosystems. (Verma et al. 2016, 649)

Putting together pre-existing courses in the areas of environmental studies, ethnic studies, education, geography/anthropology, political science, wildland recreation management and agriculture and adding two new courses in the areas of Indigenous and Native Studies, one focusing on international and policy issues and the other on issues of federal Indian law in the United States, the new Minor embodies Cal Poly’s mission of educating students to the challenges of a “diverse and increasingly interdependent global society” (qt. in Verma et al. 2016, 650).<sup>17</sup> The Minor also complicates the notion of a ‘diverse’ education by encouraging students to challenge Eurocentric tenets of Western education and embracing more than one worldview and one set of solutions to questions of sustainability, resource utilization, and related environmental issues (650). From surveys presented to Cal Poly students prior to the establishment of the program, it was clear that these students expressed significant interest and eagerness to enroll in the classes offered in the new Minor, adding that they felt the Minor “[would] provide a more complex way of thinking with more breadth of knowledge” (654). In line with the principles expressed by scholars of TEK, Cal Poly students recognize, when presented with the necessary information, that issues of natural resources and environmental sustainability require a diversity of intellectual approaches and that the perspective of Indigenous Peoples, based on a long-time observation and attentiveness to the environment, cannot but enrich their knowledge and perspectives (Kimmerer 2002, 433).

In *The Idea of Latin America* (2005), Mignolo discusses the notion of ‘interculturalidad,’ which is different from multiculturalism, by referring to the creation of Amawtay Wasi, the Universidad Intercultural de las Nacionalidades y Pueblos Indígenas, in Quito, Ecuador, as a university “conceived in the paradigm of co-existence” (121) working at the crossroads of Indigenous and Western epistemologies. He writes: “Rather than being another university led by Indigenous leaders, it is an-other university led by Indigenous needs and principles of knowledges and values” (122). The fact that it is still called a University, and that it is open to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, Mignolo further explains, is a testament to the fact that “‘interculturalidad’ works—not by rejection and negation but by integration into the paradigm of co-existence” (122). The government of Ecuador, under the current presidency of Rafael Corea, obviously disagreed when, in 2013, it decided to decommission and suspend the University on the basis of an evaluation in which the university appeared to have failed “the score required for continuity” (“The Closing”).

I was reminded of the story of Amawtay Wasi when I began working with colleagues at Cal Poly toward establishing the INRE minor. I was hoping that our small example of ‘interculturalidad’ on California Central

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<sup>16</sup> As reported in a recent article describing the Cal Poly Minor, similar collaborative programs are already in place at State University of New York, Syracuse; Montana State University; University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, University of Oregon, and California State University, Humboldt and San Marcos campuses (Verma et al. 2016, 650).

<sup>17</sup> I co-designed with Dr. Priya Verma, a faculty member in the Natural Resources department, a cross-listed course titled *ES/NR 406: Indigenous Peoples and International Law and Policy*, which we co-taught for the first time at Cal Poly in 2014. Tracing the historical development of international law, the course addresses the contemporary Indigenous movement’s increasing presence within the international legal system culminating in a close textual reading of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The course also assesses the impact of developing international law norms affecting the human rights of Indigenous Peoples with particular attention to environmental issues.





Coast might serve as a model and hope for other universities in the face of an incessant colonization of knowledge and resistance to “delink,” in Mignolo’s sense of the term, from the model of corporate university that governs Western institutions of higher education. I was hoping that, by introducing students to the stories of Charm, Coyote and the ducks, and to the intricacies of Silko’s spider web metaphors, they could get an entrance into “a spatial shift in the geography of knowledge” (Mignolo 2005, 121) and take at heart King’s warning to decide how they are going to live their lives now that they have heard these stories.

Against a background that might at first suggest otherwise, with a curriculum strongly infused by Western epistemological thinking and with a student body demographics clearly indicating that diversity at Cal Poly remains a future goal rather than a present reality, it is encouraging and extremely rewarding, as an educator working at the intersections of knowledges, to see that there are students willing to take up the challenge of a new Minor such as the INRE. Moreover, it holds promises for a brighter future at Cal Poly to see these same students increasingly enrolling in Ethnic Studies courses in which they are required to read texts and embark upon concepts/solutions that make possible for “another thinking” (Mignolo 2000, 66).

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