

THERE'S NO PLACE TO GO

An Interview With Dominique

Aragorn!

Fall 2015

A!

I'm sitting here talking to Dominique. I could introduce him in a variety of ways but I want to start out by asking him how he would describe himself and why he thinks he's of interest in the context of the series of interviews I've been having in Black Seed.

D

Well I think that I'm in a position in the middle in some ways. Usually people are coming strongly from one side or the other, either as an anarchist or a Native American. Within the tension between post left and identitarian positions, I'm like an illegitimate child. I'm someone who stays aware of what comes out of native theory but I'm also interested in reading anarchist writers. So as far as identities go, I would present myself as a reader with bruises, that would be my role for today.

A!

It is funny because when you set up an interview, obviously a lot of my goal in these interviews is to present a long-form version of a talk with a native person who the general reader will probably never have this talk with, and I guess the goal was to say rather than infantilize/celebrate natives just because they exist, just talking to them in a series of talking points ("I'm an activist who's done prison work in minnesota, and I've had these successes..."), my idea was always to take native people who have an interest in anti-authoritarian politics broadly and contextualize them.

in this way you're an interesting person to talk to because the previous two people I interviewed for Black Seed have activist pedigrees. And that hasn't been your schtick.

D

I guess I could say who my family is, how I grew up, with connections to native radicalism, or talk about being a prison convict, even though I wasn't a political prisoner, but I think a lot of times in anti-authoritarian circles, that's considered an authentic identity. But I'm not really concerned with presenting authenticity. I would like to think that I'm not an activist but I have been involved in doing things with other anarchists for a long time, for better or worse.

a!

But that's you responding to activist as a swear word in anarchist circles or the...

d.

The term has some negative connotations. Activism as the obligation to sacrifice yourself for the cause, to stay busy until judgment comes, that doesn't work for me, but I still exist in a world where actions occur.

a!

...opposite of a swear word. In other words it's almost a meaningless signifier.

d.

With the idea of reading in the context of green anarchist perspectives, I would agree with a lot of critiques of anthropology and say that it's a lot more stimulating to me to directly talk to native people, as opposed to through a second source, but that you can also look at indigeneity through literature, and that's maybe a more respectful way to go about it.

A!

How do you think about quote unquote literature in the context of the famous Russell Means essay about spoken word vs written word.i

D

Looking into these issues, I've found that there's more questions than answers. For someone totally immersed in our american environment it's hard to say we are oral, and to argue that in academic papers in English; it's hard. I agree that a text is a sort of static conversation that happens in this alienated way, but I still think that literature is not an alien thing for natives at this point.

A!

When I think about my own life... I experienced life entirely as an oral culture until I was six or seven. I can say pretty strongly that my mother was an incredible book-worm, she loved to read, but she was also my gateway to native america. So most of social life was around the kitchen table until I was old enough to read and then I went into a room alone and read, but then it was richer when I came back to the table... I guess my tentative argument is that the slices of our life could have these different moments.

D

I think that's what is interesting about anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor [GD]; he's trying to put the oral culture into literature. He's trying to write in a way that is inspired by story telling. Me trying to describe him or write like that, I can't do that. But this points to how important oral traditions are to the Three Fires peoples. But I guess, also, I mean to talk about my story... I think I'm similar to you in a way in regards to my family. Like my dad was a native radical in the Twin Cities at the height of when that was something people were talking about...

A!

When america actually cared...

D

It was a time when people conspicuously cared about these issues. My mom is a non-indian who is still involved with native solidarity work so it's... it's a personal thing. I grew up on military bases, so it was kind of like I didn't know I was native until later. I mean, I got the "you're native" but I didn't understand what that meant. After going and meeting older relatives, going to the reservation, it was kind of like a therapeutic ritual. So what gets transmitted... is the stories. The stories that people tell you is, I guess, the link where it's not merely genetic, you know? It's not an abstraction, it's the actual people in stories... that's what I got. So it's important to me...

A!

So... it wasn't stories about some mythological figure, it was the stories about the lives of actual people around you that were mythological...? like, larger than life...

D

I'm just trying to make a point about what's left of an unbroken culture, which is already sort of a paradox . Genocide affected more than just material conditions but there are still pieces of story and ceremony. Like you hear about Nanabush and the fact that storytelling still happens... so it leads me to question materialism in a different way and wonder what it means to accept atheism. I connect the stories with people and personalities. Post-left anarchists and indigenous radicals find it hard to talk to each other. I don't consider Ojibwa to be an abstraction. When Stirner talks about Ludwig not being a generic Ludwig when you're speaking of a person; that's something I keep in mind when I talk about Anishinabe—it's not just the idea of an Indian, it's a real people who I've seen in uniqueness...

A!

That's interesting...

Just to go back to something that you said before we were recording that I was really interested in – you said you were not political. What does that mean? (like, you’re using a lot of political terms...)

D

Part of what I’m saying is that I’m not interested in mass movements... I don’t think that the idea of an American Indian movement makes sense for me or by extension APOC politics... I think that politics could be something you use in a small group, direct relationships, I believe all of our language is politicized, and that’s related to a criticism of native radicals—that comes from a native perspective. These radicals in camo don’t automatically represent traditions (I would say) and they’re speaking for elders as if the elders can’t talk themselves. This can also apply to Tribal Councils. That is one part of the story of why I would reject politics. Vizenor’s critique of communism has more to do with the communists he encounters than with historical materialism. The radicals he sees selling papers in Minneapolis would never laugh because their struggle was so grave. If I have to give up laughter for politics, I choose laughter.

A!

That’s a great point.

So last winter we threw what I’ll call a local book fair, distinct from the national-scope bookfair that is also held in the area called the Bay Area/San Francisco Anarchist Bookfair. We throw what we call the East Bay anarchist book and conversation event (we shortened that to EBAB), and it happens roughly in November. It’s a two-part event, one part traditional tabling for anarchist projects and publications, and the second part sort of an intentional set of conversations obviously about the books that are interesting but also about theory, anarchist ideas, what does it mean and why is it relevant to be an anarchist in this century. This year the theme was decolonization, and you did a presentation. Can you talk a bit about that and start out with the name, which I think for many people was very provocative.

D

My presentation was called “Native Simulations, Cross bloods, and Pre-Left Anarchy.” I’ll start with pre-left anarchy, which was a response to post-left anarchism. It examines a tendency in native radicalism or decolonization (when those overlap) to say that the pre-contact new world was egalitarian and didn’t have this whole list of things, patriarchy, capitalism, etc... I’m concerned when people call for a non-western anarchism. I think it’s interesting the way the post-left posits that there’s a relationship to the left that we’ve gone past. Unfortunately, I think Native Americans are still expected to share interests with the left.

A!

we've definitely been a victim of the left for...

D

Right. A lot of these critiques of anthropology could come out of native experiences, a lot of criticism comes from there. I don't know that there was pre-left anarchism that you could easily line up to categories that we use today. But there were possibilities that pointed towards anarchy. You can't generalize about Native Americans but there's enough evidence for me to believe that there were different ways of living, that societies were distinct in their values, expressions, and economies, and I like the idea of openness instead of trying to put our categories in other peoples, places, or times.

A!

So let's unpack that a little. You say you're uncomfortable or you don't like the idea of non-western anarchisms. What are you referring to, what does that mean? ie are you referring specifically to the pamphlet called "Non Western Anarchisms," written by Jason Adams in the late 90s?

D

The non-western anarchist pamphlet I think was mostly big-A anarchism in non-western places, but not necessarily a non-western worldview that is also anti-authoritarian. I'm responding partially to people who say things like "anarchism is white," that it is "of no use for supposedly marginal people." Anarchism has been a mostly European phenomenon ...

A!

By the word...

D

Perhaps we should turn to Marxism? But, seriously I think there was probably plenty of anarchy on turtle island. There's anarchistic aspects to Nanabush who is (I would say) not a generic trickster from a primordial folklore, but a specific way to tell stories or a certain spirit. That's what I draw on.

A!

The other thing I was going to ask you about was what you mean by a utopian pre-contact world vs the world we live in now.

This has a lot of impact because part of what people mean when they speak about the Left is something like a utopian future (that's equality, liberty, and fraternity since the left comes out of the french revolution). So that's what they seem to be referencing: "they came to this land and these things existed and then we fucked them up."

D

When you're talking about decolonization, the problem is... where do you draw the line. What tools are you going to use to decide what things were like before, or who we were before as Ojibwa people.

You have to use experts like ethnologists for information. Christian missionaries for indigenous hymn and bible translations. Looking backwards can be problematic for the colonized. Political optimists use the child to represent the future. Natives are often times expected to look back on a lost utopia. We're supposed to already be dead. That's sort of my reaction to some primitive yearnings, that seem to say "here's the point that we need to rewind to." I think the drawbacks may be close to those of other utopias.

A!

I heard a disturbing story from one of my elders recently. They basically said that the Ottawa (related to Ojibwa but not quite) had a pretty fixed notion of the great spirit, that was basically an origin story of a great spirit that created but was indifferent. But the great spirit was always referred to, so when the catholics came, it was a seamless transition. This obviously makes me very uncomfortable because it means that my people were ok with the christians when they came! Because the world views just weren't that different. And whoever came, the jesuits or whoever, did a pretty good job of "all ya gotta do is change the name!"

D

Yea, I always like to listen to elders but I've never been very good at hearing what they tell me.

A!

[laughs]

D

But I've heard traditional people say that the pipe and the cross are same thing.

A!

Ooo fuuuuck

D

That the smoke brings our prayers up to the great spirit... I don't think they're the same thing. But if our pre-contact ancestors were interchangeable with the monotheists we would have to rebel against them too.

A!

For me the point is that 1. native america is not one thing. Different tribes have different ways in which they wore these values, so for me the disturbing part of the story is that my people, who as it turned out at some point in the geopolitical story were given this choice of "convert or walk to Oklahoma," were really ok with the conversion (very few Ottawa from Michigan walked to Oklahoma) because mostly they were ok with... in other words the way they wore their version of the great spirit ended up being – in their own minds – okay with catholics.

And for me, someone who wants to believe that my predecessors were ready to fuck shit up... they really weren't.

D

For sure. This is related to where you draw the line in the situation that we're in presently. I would like to consider christianity as something that I know doesn't work for me as a tool. The idea that natives lived a natural, edenic existence that got fucked up but there is a way we could get back there, sounds pretty christian but of course my rez is catholic, and I don't know if the world views match up necessarily, but colonization wasn't always one-sided, and that's part of the dilemma... that there was an exchange. And how can we leave our ancestors with agency, if you want to call it that. They were humans who were reacting, and that's sort of how I approach anarchism, because it's mostly a non-native thing, but I like to think that I can use it and not become a European.

A!

Ok. So then, I guess that an appropriate question that I'm supposed to ask you is what does decolonization mean to you, but I find that difficult because it seems like a robot question. I don't even personally know what decolonization means for myself so I wouldn't ask the question but...

D

When people ask me that question my answer is "a lot of burning" That is the only thing that makes sense to me if you want to use that as a metaphor. In *The Witch of Going Snake* it says "Throw away your guns and your steel knives and pots. Kill your cats. Destroy everything you have that came from the white man." I don't know where to begin to make that separation. I don't know what is colonized inside of myself. It all seems pretty damaged. Maybe that is what is radical. I can say to natives in the city, "you can't go home and find the answer there." Just like, me leaving rural areas and coming to the city didn't change everything; there's no place to go.

A!

Meaning you weren't innocent in the country and spoiled by the city.

D

We can't always look to what A.I.M did, or to our great ancestors, or wait for the future for answers, that's part of what I'm saying, not to look for something else besides what is here, and what is here sucks, so that's the position I'm in.

A!

There was also something in your presentation about Andrea Smith, who has been in the middle of some controversy recently...

D

I talked about her piece called "Indigenous Feminism without Apology," which makes the case that pre-contact societies were matriarchal and basically anarchistic. I want to see anarchist ideas reflected throughout societies, but I'm not sure that it's always true. The fact that Andrea Smith has been outed as a native imposter is not surprising. Apparently there were rumors for a while that she was faking Indian. It's difficult because proving that you are an Indian involves official papers and government bureaucracies. No one really asks if someone is a "real" white person. But, the Smiths and Dolezals are at home in the world of simulations. Vizenor says that if Natives are gonna live, then the Indian as a sign has to die.

A!

Oh, that's interesting. He means indian as in tear in the eye of the crying stoic...

D

The savage, the vanishing tragedy. The natural ecologist.

A!

Right.

D

The post-Indian approach centers specific tribal groups or bands, as opposed to using Native American as a catch-all, because while the Ojibwa existed; there's never been an Indian except in people's imaginations. This means stepping away from victimization and recognition as a way to frame what it means to be native. The idea that we all died or that we're sad and defeated isn't true and it isn't helpful for those of us who are still around. Talking about Vizenor for me includes a statement

against the brown paper bag test [the idea that if one is not darker than a brown paper bag then one may as well be white] because he is very phenotypically white. I could talk about indigeneity without referencing light complexions or dark skin at all, and I guess mine is somewhere in between. There is more to the story than just pigmentation. Sure natives have a phenotype, there is a blood memory, but Nanabush doesn't have DNA.

A!

Can you talk about nanabush?

D

Nanabush is an important Ojibwa character in story telling, usually credited with creating the world, but sometimes seen as a prankster. I would say to people reading this, don't go read a book that's like "Folklore from All Around the World." Because it's not really about that. Nanabush is something that's indescribable and dangerous. They are someone playful who breaks taboos, they wouldn't fit in with a christian society. he's not civilized. In Baedan, they say they want to become feral—they're talking about wanting to approach life wildly. I can relate to that. I think that these queer nihilist identities have something in common with the person of undetermined race...

A!

Of course

D

... since we can't fit in, in either place. so we're in this strange position, but maybe that's not a bad thing.

A!

There's a thousand things to talk about in that little bit you just said, not the least of which is how unacceptable it is to break taboos; in other words we're talking about a whole set of people who are proclaiming their liminal status (as anarchists) but no one will break a taboo. One of the ways I experience it is around moralism... To bring up a really stupid (and old) example: Bob Black calling the cops. The idea that this event is such a fetish object 20 years after it happened—many people, any time they see a Bob Black post or anything about him, will repost the shitty thing he did 20 years ago. This is the opposite of celebrating or even appreciating taboo, it's indicative of a policing culture. It feels almost puritanical, like we should be wearing corsets and shouting "shame" at people (which I do sometimes in play, only because it's hysterical that people think it means anything). It's just strange to me that there's all this theory that says one thing, but all this practice that says you cannot do that thing.

D

You could frame Nanabush as a sinner according to christian values. He would get called out in the anarchist subculture. He (or sometimes she) has an tendency to shape-shift. I like crossing lines as a liminal person, not that it's a dialectic, but I don't believe that there's a static identity. Earth First! the way it used to be, or seemed to be, with rednecks and radical environmentalists going out and fucking shit up, to me is awesome, better than reaching consensus.

A!

Black Seed folks went to the EF! gathering in 2014. This year in 2015 the details are unclear given the report backs, but it appears that a POC faction denounced the gathering from within, and as a group left the gathering. That was the 2015 controversy.

I know. Very surprising.

D

I would quote Bob Black and say nobody intervenes more to mind other people's business than separatists. Like radical feminists, who have this affinity and want to live by themselves. I can see why that makes sense, and they should do that. The idea of people choosing who they want to work with, that totally makes sense to me. For me personally it means it's hard to be a nationalist. I can't find people exactly like me, so I'm not interested in agreeing on every point before I work on something with someone.

A!

I guess I'm the closest person to you around...

D

I can relate to you because we share a certain double burden of concerns... I could go back around now and say how I got here. Being a prisoner and being poor, that's not what makes a native, but it was part of my experience, There were a lot of native prisoners in the prison where I was.

a!

Because it was in...

d.

South Dakota. They automatically put you in a cell with someone of your own race. It's rigidly segregated . And that's part of why I felt an uneasiness about Oakland scene politics, because I had already had to live in a violent racist environment.

While I was in prison I received free copies of Green Anarchy magazine and read a lot of other radical texts. At the same time, I was also confronted by racist nationalists of different stripes. It was all sort of coming at me, so it made sense to view the ideologies as stories. When coming to the bay area... that's another thing that's important for what I'm talking about is that I talked to actual anarchists in person. This is me doing the anthropological fieldwork with existing anarchists, and it's important because it made me see the ideas differently, what the scope is, different from being in prison, reading essays. It's a different terrain. For example labels such as a snitch, pedophile, white supremacist etc. are used less frequently and carry a different weight in prison than when used by some anarchists.

A!

One of the things that's really different is an urban setting, especially a big city, in something like what we could call the APOC scene. Almost no one talks about their childhood, because if they did the coherence of their political position today, and the difficulty of reconciling that with an actual life story, would all fall apart.

Let's go on talking about your presentation. Say more about liminal identities and Vizenor in general. He's written dozens of books?

D.

Almost 50. You could situate him as writing speculative fiction. He sometimes gets put on the science fiction shelf or in the slipstream genre. He has written short stories, novels, poetry, and non-fiction. He gets lumped in with postmodernism. I think it's because it's hard to frame what he's writing about.

A!

How would you compare him to Sherman Alexie, another well known native story teller, with fantastical elements?

D

"Magical realism" is usually how people refer to writers like Sherman Alexie, but I would say that Vizenor is different because he's interacting with continental philosophy, if not always directly.

A!

Less sex?

D

More sex than you might expect. Taboo themes are often featured in native fiction. In a strange way it is sexy. Native people aren't necessarily puritanical. So in these stories by Vizenor and others like N. Scott Momaday there is transgression, wastefulness, incest, people having sex with two dogs or a bear, and it's in the frame of native storytelling, and it's not speculating like "i can imagine a world where you could hump a dog;" it's more like, "what if the line between human and animal isn't a real thing?" Definitely there is sex and it's great, and I guess people could think of Vizenor as sort of like Samuel Delany? But maybe a little harder to analyze.

A!

How many of his books are books of essays?

D

That is a lot of what he writes. He started off in Eastern Studies, studying haikus, and I believe he spent some time in Japan. I just think he's a strange character, and the idea that he'd be into Japanese things makes as much sense as anything one would do in university. Ojibwa dream songs have a similar structure to haikus and may have developed earlier. He explicitly talks about his ideas outside of fiction and I enjoy that too. He has several collections of essays some of them touching on Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Albert Camus...

A!

Does he have a similar story of one native parent, one white parent?

D

Yes a similar story. He was raised by his Grandmother on the White Earth reservation in Minnesota. We're related because we're both related to Nanabush, coincidentally. He also taught at UC Berkeley.

A!

Is he retired now?

D

He is a professor emeritus at Berkeley; but that's the thing... I'm not a philosopher and I don't think that ethnic studies is a position of strength. But just like people use anthropology as an anarchist practice, I enjoy reading. Other fictions like the works of the Dark Mountain project are great too. They share stories that don't spoil the ending.

A!

...So, liminal identity.

D

For me I can say I'm half native and half white, but I don't always want to do that because I don't think it's too symmetrical, and there are automatically issues at least for my tribe where it gets into conversations about blood quantum and genetics and I'm not interested in that. Also I'm enrolled in a federally-recognized tribe but I don't think that is the way to tell who is native or not. Either through the government or through hereditary science. None of that really matters.

A!

Just a side bar, I have a canadian Ottawa grandfather.

D

Oh shit.

A!

It doesn't count.

D

Yea.

[laughs]

Vizenor uses the term cross bloods for mixed race Indians. it means that you're part of two worlds and don't really walk in either one of them. The scruffy rez dog mongrel comes to mind. There are some native science fiction writers who talk about Metis identity, and frame it as "we're have louis riel as our messiah figure, and mixed blood people are feral and wild." I don't know if I necessarily live up to that...

A!

It would be nice...

D

Sure. Liminality means that things don't have to be this or that, I guess. But it's not necessarily a synthesis either. The two sides might not ever be reconciled. It opens a space for questioning the value of identity altogether.

A!

What's nice about it is that liminal evokes a twilight area where things are indistinguishable from each other, and could be a whole bunch of things.

D

I was recently reading an HP Lovecraft story called “the Mound” that is basically about a haunted Indian burial ground.

A!

I’m sure HP dealt with this with total sensitivity...

D

Of course... The narrator is an ethnologist studying people in Oklahoma. I guess when we talk about queerness, it’s like it can mean you don’t want to reproduce, you can’t get married, you’re not a normal part of society, so you’re in the shadows. and I like that idea—you could apply it to liminal people. But in the Lovecraft story, it’s one of the only times that he vividly describes the cthulhuian underworld, and he could be describing modern American cities. I mean everything is covered in slime, or whatever, but to the point of Lovecraft looking in shadows, and looking at ambiguity as something that’s a complete terror . So I’m thinking about shadows not being horrifying, but also that being horrified is not necessarily something to avoid.

A!

To go back, we sort of touched on her for a second and then I distracted us with the controversy. In Andrea Smith’s work you got some points that were worth talking through? So what were those points, and how does that change now that we know that her “quantum doesn’t correspond to her points.”

D

Yea. Well it seemed like she was trying to do something similar to your explorations into indigenous anarchism, in trying to de-center Europe, and looking at ways that traditional societies were more anarchistic and especially in Latin America, groups that are saying “we are for anarchy and it has to do with our traditions.” I think that’s worth talking about. I don’t know what to say about her on-existent blood quantum. I want to say that it doesn’t really matter; but I think it does matter in a way. The question is do Indians think differently? Academic writing can be so abstract that the words are interchangeable. The identity doesn’t matter because there’s too much distance. If you can switch “indigenous” with “queer,” “disabled,” or “woman”... cut and paste, and it would be saying basically the same thing. I think that is a problem.

A!

This corresponds with your general point which is that specificity matters. In other words we don’t need a new Native American movement, we need a new Minnesota Ojibwa movement.

D

I'm not sure how to respond to that, because I'm not really even concerned with ...

A!

...the politics of it.

D

Things are going on now that are political, and it's not really interesting to me but, a lot of Minnesota tribes are changing from blood quantum to descendency. Currently there is a percentage of blood required to become a tribal member, and they want to change it so that you can enroll if you have a distant ancestor. It has to do with resources really. You could make a connection between tribal organizations' preoccupation with funding and the relationship of native radicals to white activists; there's already an imbalance but people need the help. Native solidarity activists are always going to talk about how much they hate the allies, but they are always going to invite them to come back. Self determination in the case of the Red Lake Ojibwa means living by themselves and practicing traditions. It doesn't need a defense, they're doing it, they don't need help from academics in the cities. Environmentalists are always going to want to talk to natives, really, so that's why I feel like I have something different to say. Maybe I'm just offering another fictitious image?

A!

Does Vizenor use the term "simulation"? Obviously I know about Baudrillard using that word...

D

He does draw on Baudrillard, so if people aren't familiar with the concept, it refers to the making of a map that is 1:1 in scale, where the representation replaces the actual thing. It's easy to see that none of the shit on tv about Indians is real. Representation is an enemy, so I'm not positing that there's a right one. Every movie... it's a mythical thing, it's not real. Its just spectacle. Vizenor is saying that the real thing is the Ojibwa spirit of survival and we lose something when we learn to identify with the Image. I don't know if there's a real thing under everything, I guess.

A!

Right. This reminds me of watching natives who I respect get all hot under the collar about the feather headdresses that the sexy people are wearing to concerts... I totally accept that this is the same thing as wearing blackface or whatever ... and privileged people do that. That's almost the definition of privilege, that you get to wear the scalps of your enemies around your neck or whatever [laughter]. I guess there's a liberal thing at the heart of this that says "yes, colonization happened, yes

there're horrific class differences, yes, racism by some definition is at the heart of the american engine... and we should hide it!" In other words the fight against the headdress isn't the fight. not at all. But a lot of people get so wound up about these being the fights. And especially the headdress... I mean, it's not my culture... this is not the universal sign of Natives. Anyways, something of a sidebar, sorry...

D

No, that is something that I think about. I question what kind of understanding of racism includes the idea that you could just ask someone not to be racist, and they'll be just like "oh yea, you're right. What was I thinking?" It's not about winning moral arguments. When it comes to headdress, it's possible people on your reservation did wear headdresses during the time when that attracted tourism. I've seen old pictures at Red Lake with men in headdresses, and it shows you... it's not always about calling other people out. I also see how much we've been affected by these images as well. They had to wear headdresses because that's what people thought natives did. But you have to give up anything left of the Ojibwa to become an Indian.

A!

This is a big topic of conversation in my family because we were involved in putting on powwows in the area. Of course a traditional powwow would be acorns and raccoons, it wouldn't be flashy looking at all. It would look like woodland stuff, which is drab and dark colors, no yellow feathers or spears...

[laughter]

... and tomahawks and all that nonsense. So of course that wouldn't bring any of the white people with deep pockets who will spend \$500 on a necklace. Or, you'd get people for the cool baskets, but...

D

I think what you're describing also applies to native radicals. You have to present yourself as a native to non-natives, so you're going to have to simulate. To me that's humiliating.

[laughter]

A!

What we're talking about are complex deep problems that are not solvable, and those kind of questions tend to get called postmodern. So how is the direction you are taking this conversation in, not postmodern?

D

Well... By default it is postmodern, but it's not coming from France. One sort of becomes postmodern if you're living in this society with cultural schizophrenia. You could line up these categories, like multi-centeredness vs centralization, there're certain concepts that line up with postmodernism, like the postmodern premise that there are many stories, not one central truth. While the Ojibwa compromise is "there's science, but we can still tell our stories, which are not invalidated." There is also an obvious indigenous influence on French theory going in the other direction, in the form of Pierre Clastres' war machines, Situationist potlatch, and so forth. We could also reach the conclusions of animism using object-oriented ontology—the idea that humans are not the center of the universe. But I wouldn't say it's postmodern. Not an easy answer I guess.

A!

I would say that people calling this postmodern is basically name-calling, and is really a complaint about not knowing what to do, and wanting to be told what to do.

D

I think the way that the question is asked already limits how we can answer it. I'm not convinced that we can have the right ideas, and then go forth and change the world. I think I'm part of the world and the world changes me. I don't think that we have special consciousness we can bestow on other people. Or that there's a way forward. And maybe that there's not a way backward either. My only answer is that it's complicated. If the idea is decolonization (that is, understanding native people) be cautious when someone tells you that they have the answer, that they know the right approach for working with native people. Skip the anti-oppression workshops. There's not one way because there's not one native society. So there's not an easy solution.

If you want to learn from indians, consider caring about the people close to you right now. Try to get to the point that what you're doing is revolutionary, without waiting for some kind of break.

i“For America to Live, Europe Must Die!” starts out with this passage: The only possible opening for a statement of this kind is that I detest writing. The process itself epitomizes the European concept of “legitimate” thinking; what is written has an importance that is denied the spoken. My culture, the Lakota culture, has an oral tradition, so I ordinarily reject writing. It is one of the white world's ways of destroying the cultures of non-European peoples, the imposing of an abstraction over the spoken relationship of a people.

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An Interview With Dominique
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