

Book Review

By Angela Wilson Waziyatawin

Trudy Sable, *Remember This! Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives* (University of Nebraska. Lincoln, Nebraska, 2005)

Waziyatawin Angela Wilson has taken on one of the academic challenges of the century—the decolonization of history as taught in our Western academic institutions. Chapter by chapter, she painstakingly delineates what makes an Indigenous history and an Indigenous historical perspective, and how these are different from a Western approach to history. She walks us through what is unique to her history, the oral tradition of the Dakota, including a language that expresses a different world view and a different perspective about what is important to remember through time. In so doing, she has used only Indigenous sources as part of the decolonizing process she promotes. Her sources, she feels, are the people who can understand the unique cultural context out of which the Dakota oral traditions arose. These are the people who can be trusted to “tell it straight”. *Remember This! Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives* is asking us all to pay attention and consider another way of knowing, and another way history is culturally produced.

Wilson has taken the often painful path that many Indigenous peoples have had to follow in order to prove their traditions have validity in their own right as bodies of knowledge that are passed on through time. Those who are brave and persevering enough, like Wilson, have mastered the educational system of their colonizers in order to prove, in the language of their colonizers, that their lands were their lands, that they did have their own systems of education and communication that were meaningful and effective, and that their social organization and systems of justice worked well. The completion of this education then validates them as an “educated person” by the standards of the colonial society, a concept that is often at odds with their own cultural values and ways of knowing. However, the failure of this system for Indigenous peoples is suggested by the high drop out rate of Indigenous students from schools, and the astounding rate of teen suicides within Indigenous communities of North America.

There is something that can be done, which is why Wilson is requesting a dialogue within academia to look at alternative forms of history, such as the Dakota oral traditions of Eli Taylor, her ninety-one year old adopted grandfather. It is Eli Taylor's narratives that she records and uses as the basis of her analysis to promote the validity of the Dakota oral tradition as history. As part of her decolonization methodology, she has painstakingly worked with Wahpetunwin Carolynn Schommer to include the Dakota text of Eli Taylor's narratives, along with the English translation. Such a dialogue, she hopes, will broaden our perspective of history by examining the assumptions about what exactly the production of history entails and who these histories serve.

The process of decolonization has various aspects, but first Wilson offers a discussion relating to the meaning of decolonization itself. For this, she draws on the definition of Winona Wheeler, a Cree scholar. Wheeler views decolonization as a "strategy for empowerment" as well as a transformative process which rests on indigenous peoples' willingness to change and trust in their own cultural traditions and values.

A large part of decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degrees to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices. Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection and a rejection of victimage...It is about transforming negative reactionary energy into the more positive rebuilding energy needed in our communities, (14)

Ideally, according to Wilson, Indigenous communities, especially the youth, will adopt the terms 'critical consciousness' and 'decolonization' into their own vocabulary along with their own traditional language and traditional means of resistance. She states, "In this way we can raise a new generation of Indigenous Peoples deeply committed to their tribal traditions but also deeply critical of the institutions of colonialism." (14)

For Indigenous peoples, the recovery and maintenance of their languages is part of the conscious resistance and a necessary part of the decolonization process. It is also one of the greatest challenges they face. These languages express another world view, with inherent cultural values, in this case Dakota, and ways of conceptualizing the world, including time itself. Perhaps the biggest challenge to Wilson

within academia will be communicating the role of spirituality in Dakota oral traditions. Drawing on spiritual forces for wisdom and information is an integral part of the Dakota history-making process. It is not a process they feel needs an explanation; these are simply part of Dakota reality, a reality that transcends ordinary space and time. These world views, values, and concepts of time bear on how and what is passed down in an oral tradition.

What makes Dakota oral tradition a valid history-making process is that there is an acknowledged group of experts who have been trained as specialists and empowered by the Dakota community to carry on the oral tradition or their people.

In indigenous societies, community members are ever vigilant in their quest for gifted and committed purveyors of knowledge and stories, and these individuals are apprenticed with a tremendous sense of responsibility to their people.... Communities have their own requirements about who is authorized to speak and about what topic, who has reliable stories, etc. These tight regulations are not always visible from the outside (44).

According to Wilson, once a story is accepted as part of the oral tradition by these authorities, it is automatically legitimized as historically relevant; they must be “respected in their own right, and stand on their own. “The only standards that matter are those set within the culture and if stories are carried by respected carriers of the tradition then they have passed the necessary internal standards” (43). She points to the fact that some stories have survived for thousands of years within Dakota oral tradition, a proof of the integrity of the tradition (44). This process of deciding what is historically relevant is not dissimilar to Western history being validated by a culture of historians with a set of criteria defining what constitutes legitimate historical text.

Eli Taylor, in Wilson’s opinion, was a decolonizer, one who maintained what it means to be a Dakota as a carrier of their oral traditions and speaker of the Dakota language until his death in 1999. In her analysis of Eli Taylor’s narratives, Wilson describes the importance of developing relationships between the orator and listeners, and the obligations implicit to these relationships.

Within Dakota culture, history is an interpretation of the past that becomes active only when a relationship has been developed between a storyteller and a listener....Stories deemed significant to perpetuate have been handed down orally through the generations, always reliant on the generosity and veracity of the storyteller...Most important the continuation of these stories has been dependent on the meaning of the stories being conveyed and understood within the context of the world view inherent in the Dakota language (23).

Part of her discussion of what makes Dakota history unique is the acknowledgement of these relationships and the obligations they carry. Wilson gives specific examples in the way Eli Taylor sets the context for each story.

The book does not explore the changes that come with the writing down of oral traditions or how the orator/audience relationships and obligations will be altered by adopting a written medium. But Wilson's decolonization process is working on many fronts, and her book is, in her own words, *"the first attempt at an examination of Dakota stories and language from a historical perspective. Moreover, the academic methodology, terminology and theory have been filtered through the lens of Dakota eyes. The result is a product that stretches the boundaries of historical scholarship and brings to academic audiences our Dakota history as we perceive it."* (239)

The recording and analysis of Taylor's narratives becomes a decolonizing activity. Wilson is re-writing her culture's history through Dakota eyes and in the Dakota language. In so doing, past Dakota heroes, resisters of colonial powers, who have been negatively portrayed in Western historical texts as murderers and rapists, will be honored. Specifically she cites the 38 Dakota men hung in the largest mass execution in United States history during the U.S.-Dakota war of 1862. Furthermore, Eli Taylor himself has deliberately chosen to become part of that written history *"so people could see that Dakota were human, and to see how they as Dakota conceptualize the world, past, present and future."* (236)

Wilson is asking for a dialogue and for cooperation, both from her Dakota community and from the academic community. She recognizes the need for *"tribal people and scholars to work together*

at developing and understanding the rigorous evaluation mechanisms existing in Indigenous communities and at developing a mutually agreeable code of ethics and methodological processes." (44). At the same time, as another aspect of the decolonization process, Wilson states that it is time for researchers to be accountable to the communities in which they do their research. Being accountable includes learning the language, following proper research protocol in approaching a community, and ensuring that the research benefits the community in some way. In particular, she points to the need for the development of bi-lingual texts to assist in language preservation and revitalization.

If there is to be a dialogue, as Wilson requests, a great deal of care needs to be given both to the process of the dialogue and to the issue of accountability. Dialogue is a flow of meaning between people. It is a discipline which requires participants to look carefully at assumptions they hold as part of their respective meaning-making processes. In dialogue, there is a specific intent to build bridges of mutual meaning. In a cross-cultural context, there is also the greater challenge of looking at issues of power in creating the conditions for the dialogue itself. This, for Indigenous peoples, as Wheeler stated, "requires auto-criticism, self-reflection and a rejection of victimage". (24)

In terms of accountability, having written similar codes of ethics in working with various Indigenous cultures, I feel there is some accountability that needs to come from the community itself, once a researcher has followed the proper protocol required by the community and has been accepted and approved. This reciprocal accountability would mean such things as helping assure that the researcher has access to the best translators, that committees or advisory groups of acknowledged elders or other representatives are in place and legitimized by the community, and that they themselves follow the protocols set forth. These persons could perhaps hold paid positions. However, the economics of decolonization is another topic, one that is not raised in this book.

Wilson herself alludes to the political and personal difficulties she has faced within her own community in her attempts to set up a language immersion program as part of the decolonization process. Her community was not ready. She also acknowledges that her own people do not all know the language of decolonization nor necessarily want to know. She further praises the Grotto Foundation for funding research on

endangered languages, and expresses some relief that their own language recovery program is outside of band politics. This is a reality, not a criticism, and it is important that she has acknowledged it. Many researchers who are truly trying to follow appropriate protocol or have been invited by the community itself, find frustration in dealing with band politics.

The decolonization of history poses a challenge to conventional scholarship on Indigenous cultures as Indigenous peoples attempt to produce their own histories in the face of centuries of cultural change and foreign education. Non-native scholars are being asked to consider new conceptual models and learn Indigenous languages. Indigenous scholars face many of these challenges themselves, along with the preservation of their languages and traditions and the concomitant death of their elders. Wilson documents all of these challenges well.

This book helps establish Indigenous peoples' voices in the evaluation of what counts as history, particularly their own. Further, it brings into relief what will be required to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue between academic researchers, policy makers and Indigenous peoples. Waziyatawin Angela Wilson has skillfully used the written word in her own way to strengthen acceptance and maintenance of oral traditions, while proposing new methodologies and conceptual categories based on the Dakota language. In so doing, she has carried forward the hope of Eli Taylor that this research will help contemporary Dakota find their own cultural identity and "strengthen their spirits."