**Reflection Paper #2: Past**

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This semester we have talked a lot about stories as capture tools and how data yields information, information yields narratives, and narratives shape the world around us. When Cutcha Risling Baldy addressed our class, she told us that “nothing can become until we tell a story about it” (2022). The desire for telling and hearing stories is a powerful human communication tool that transcends cultures. It can also be a tool that, in the hands of imperialist and oppressive powers, can reduce and dehumanize entire peoples and cultures. Research is especially used to justify and weaponize imperialist ideals against Indigenous Peoples while often going unnoticed for the harm it causes because it appears less obvious than the physical violence Native peoples encounter through imperialism and colonialism. Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes in her hugely influential text, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, of the very real danger of “creeping policies that intruded into every aspect of our lives, legitimated by research, informed more often by ideology" (2012, p.33). The subjugation of colonized peoples is legitimized and reinforced through data collection and dissemination which then inform policies and influence lives.

As an SOIS student, I am often reminded of the power of information, but most LIS discussions focus on access. Library and Information Science can sometimes be quite idealistic and emphasize the social good of information and knowledge sharing. I am guilty of this as well such as when I defend my degree and tout access to information as tied to democratic values. It’s easy to believe that knowledge can reveal the truth and empower the disempowered. Perhaps this is true, but it is not the complete truth. It was humbling to be reminded that the professions and academic institutions that I am part of and have looked up to can still participate in harmful narratives. One such narrative is a narrative about narratives and what constitutes the ‘correct way’ to collect and disseminate research.

The Western, colonial tradition of research often dismisses story-telling and oral history in favor of an objective, unbiased outside researcher. Of course, there is no such thing as an unbiased researcher and by gatekeeping and privileging certain ways of collecting and discussing knowledge, academic or professional institutions can control the ways in which we think about certain subjects. Bryan McKinley Brayboy addresses in his work the tension between being a Native American individual and being a researcher, a tension which has led him to outline a Tribal Critical Race Theory framework. The eighth point of this framework asserts that "Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being” (2005, p. 430). He validates the oral tradition of storytelling as a powerful communication tool with moral, psychological, and cultural purposes. He argues that the position of researcher in indigenous communities should not be as outsider but rather someone who can see stories as valuable data: “Stories often are the guardians of cumulative knowledges that hold a place in the psyches of the group members, memories of tradition, and reflections on power” (p. 440).

While reflecting on the power of story, I was reminded of a TED Talk by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie where she warned of the danger of a single story. A single story is one that reduces individuals and groups to stereotypes and presents an incomplete narrative. Adichie recounts a story from her childhood where she visits the home of her family’s domestic servant and is “startled” because it “had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor” (2009). It seems to me that an essential aspect of dehumanizing and Othering someone(s) is the estrangement from creation. Historically, indigenous and colonized groups have been barred from the creation of their own narratives or, when they continue to create art that speaks to their lived realities, it is dismissed as primitive. Later in her talk Adichie posits, "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” The insidiousness of Western academic thought is not just that it offers an incomplete picture of reality but that it insists it is the only correct way to collect that picture.

A common thread in all the writing I engaged with over these last few weeks from indigenous creators is the importance of oppositional story telling. Smith writes, “Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell which not only question the assumed nature of those ideals and the practices that they generate, but also serve to tell an alternative story: the history of Western research through the eyes of the colonized. These counter-stories are powerful forms of resistance which are repeated and shared across diverse indigenous communities” (2012, p. 32). Similarly, Dr. Baldy spoke to us about how part of decolonization is liberating the imagination from the “logics of settler-colonialism”. For instance, Brayboy builds off other Indigenous intellectuals and re-imagines power as “the ability to survive rooted in the capacity to adapt and adjust to changing landscapes, times, ideas, circumstances, and situations” rather than something that is asserted over others (p. 435). Decolonized imagination has the potential to benefit more than just colonized peoples and it begins with recognizing the power of storytelling that may exist outside the confines of what has been traditionally accepted.

**References**

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