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# WANTING TO BE INDIAN

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When Spiritual Searching  
Turns into Cultural Theft



## RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

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Fantasies of the Master Race - Literature, Cinema and the colonization of American Indians, by Ward Churchill (1992)

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, by Dee Brown (1971)

Blood of the Land, by Rex Weyler (New Society Publishers, 1992)

A Basic Call to Consciousness: the Haudenosaunee Address to the Western World (Akwesasne Notes)

Indians Are Us? by Ward Churchill (Common Courage Press, 1994)

A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization, by Howard Adams (1995)

All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life, by Winona LaDuke

### Websites:

<http://www.newagefraud.org/> - native site about Plastic Shamanism

[http://geocities.com/dont\\_pay\\_to\\_pray/](http://geocities.com/dont_pay_to_pray/) - "Don't Pay to Pray" list of frauds

<http://intercontinentalcry.org/> - Reporting on Indigenous Struggles

<http://warriorpublications.com/> - Warrior Publications

<http://wiinimikiikaa.wordpress.com/> - Revolutionary Indigenous Resistance

<http://indigenousaction.org/> - Indigenous Action Media

<http://blackmesais.org/> - Black Mesa Indigenous Support

<http://wsdp.org/> - Western Shoshone Defense Project

(This list was selected by the publisher, not Myke Johnson. For Myke's recommended authors, see Endnote #7.)

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1994 Sinister Wisdom #52  
1995 The Brown Papers  
1998 Responsible Ethics for Spirituality  
2009 Quiver distro - Santa Cruz, CA  
quiver@riseup.net - PDF available online.



# WANTING TO BE INDIAN:

## When Spiritual Searching Turns into Cultural Theft

by Myke Johnson

MANY PEOPLE ARE SEARCHING for a deeper spiritual engagement with the world, and feel a hunger unmet by the teachings and services of religious institutions. Some have begun to take an interest in Native American spiritual practices, and one can easily find workshops and lectures offering Indian rituals and ceremonies to non-Indian people. However, many Native people, including highly respected religious elders, have condemned such "borrowing." They identify it as a form of cultural exploitation, gravely detrimental to the survival and well-being of Indigenous people.

In this paper, I will be discussing the ethical questions raised by White peoples' exploration of the religious ceremonies and beliefs of American Indians.<sup>1</sup> What is at work here which makes sincere spiritual searching an act of cultural theft? Why are Native peoples endangered by this interest in their beliefs and rituals? How can we respect the cultural integrity of Indian people, and yet also honor deep-felt spiritual desires?

First, I want to introduce myself in relation to this issue. I am a White woman related by matrilineal ancestry to the Innu people, called by the French Montagnais, who are indigenous to the land which is now called Quebec and Labrador. I grew up in White U.S. Christian culture, with fair skin and red hair, and only a reminder that we were "part-Indian" to link me to any other culture. To be White is to fit into the norm in ways that gives one certain advantages denied to those who are not White. And yet the influence of my Innu great-great-great grandmother also shaped my consciousness in a Métis way. Métis are the people and culture which grew from the intermarriage of Indians and Europeans, especially French and Scottish.

This Métis consciousness makes it more complex and confusing to speak about this issue, even as it lies at the heart of my commitment and responsibility to it. Even grammatically, I question how to use “we” and “they” when I might be included in both, but not quite contained in either category. I have heard many Indian people speak out about these issues. I have decided that it is most useful for me to speak as a White woman, to raise the issues in the context of the feminist spirituality movement of which I am a part, that we might be true to our commitment to the survival and liberation of all people. Furthermore, while for me there is an element of seeking my own Native heritage, the current phenomenon of outside interest in Native spirituality is a phenomenon of White culture, and this White phenomenon affects all of us who find ourselves interested in Native Americans. It has been important for my search to get inside this White thing about Indians, to explore and understand how it works in White people, of which I am a part, so that I can understand how it affects Métis people as well.

Since childhood, I have been a spiritual person. As I was becoming an adult, the values of the gospel led me into political activism on behalf of justice and liberation. This path of justice activism led me to understanding the oppression of women, and of myself as a woman. One of the places where women experience oppression is in the area of spirituality and religion. So feminism instigated for me a spiritual search and a transformation, and with many other women I began to seek and create what we called women’s spirituality. This is when I also began to be interested in Native American spirituality.

THERE IS A PHENOMENON in White culture which affects any interaction between White people and Native Americans. White culture has created an image and called it “Indian.” But this image is a stereotype, and not really informative or accurate about real Native Americans, who are of many diverse cultures. All of us could give details about this stereotype “Indian.” An important aspect of this stereotype “Indian” is that it has two sides, like the two sides of a coin.

One side of the stereotype Indian is the Hostile Savage - the dangerous, primitive warrior who attacked the settlers of the West, or the irresponsible reservation drunk who couldn’t be trusted, the Indian of which it was said, “the only good Indian is a dead Indian.” The other side of the stereotype Indian is the Noble Savage - the innocent primitive who was naturally spiritual

## ENDNOTES

1. This pamphlet is a revision of the article which appeared in *Sinister Wisdom* #52, Spring/Summer 1994, pp. 79-88.
2. Andrea Smith, “The New Age Movement and Native Spirituality,” in *Indigenous Woman*, Vol. I #1, Spring 1991, p. 18.
3. From “Spiritual Hucksterism: The Rise of the Plastic Medicine Men,” in Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians*, (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1992) p. 217. Originally published in *Z Magazine*, Dec. 1990.
4. Pam Colorado, quoted in Wendy Rose, “The Great Pretenders: Further Reflections on Whiteshamanism,” in M. Annette Jaimes, *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 405. Original quote in Ward Churchill, “A Little Matter of Genocide: Native American Spirituality and New Age Hucksterism,” *Bloomsbury Review*, Vol. 8 #5, Sept/Oct 1988, pp. 23-4. Her tribal affiliation was mentioned in *Indigenous Woman* magazine.
5. One account of the vision quest is given in Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 44-66.
6. Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race*, pp. 216-7.
7. For those who would like to learn more about the experience of Indian people and support Native women writers, I would recommend the books of the following Native writers, as a start: Paula Gunn Allen, Betty Louise Bell, Beth Brant, Maria Campbell, Chrystos, Louise Erdrich, Janice Gould, Janet Campbell Hale, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, M. Annette Jaimes, Lee Maracle, Leslie Marmon Silko, Anna Lee Walters.
8. Joy Asham Federick, “Fencepost Sitting and How I Fell Off to One Side,” in *Give Back: First Nations Perspectives on Cultural Practice*, (North Vancouver, BC, Canada), Gallerie: Women Artists’ Monographs, Issue 11, 1992, p. 42.
9. Paraphrase from a lecture.
10. Joanna Kadi describes how cultural appropriation treats objects as “ahistorical and culturally empty.” See “Whose Culture Is It Anyway?,” *Sojourner* Vol. 18 #2, October 1992, pp. 5-6.
11. Andrea Smith, “For All Those Who Were Indian in a Former Life,” *Sojourner*, Vol. 16 #3, Nov. 1990, p. 8.
12. Jewish White women are an exception here since Judaism, like Indian religions, is a community based religion.
13. Jane Caputi, “Interview with Paula Gunn Allen,” *Trivia* 16/17, Fall 1990, p. 50.
14. From the poem, “Shame On!” in *Dream On*, (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1991).

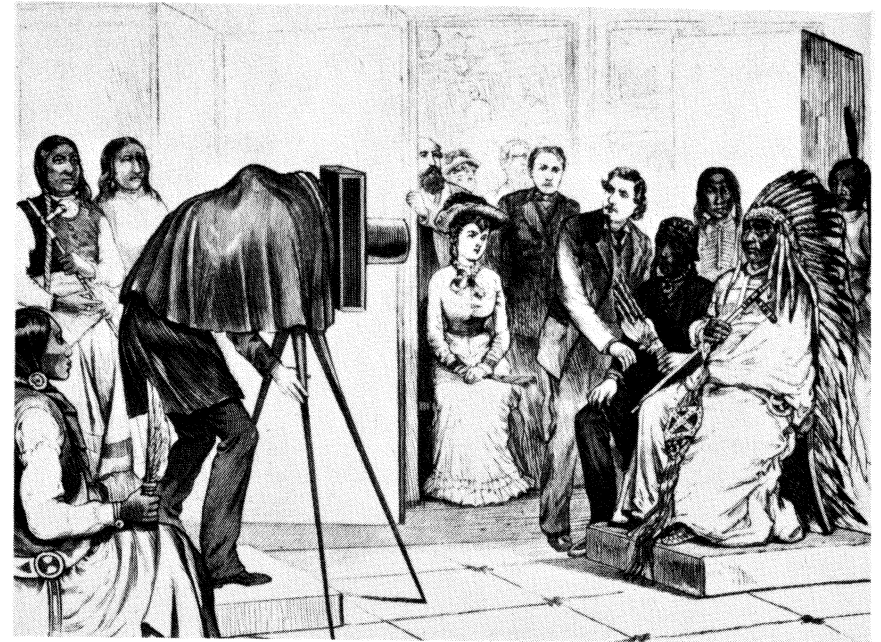
I dedicate this paper to my German-American paternal grandmother, born Mary Lucille Heisler, who died March 9, 1995, at the age of 98.

responsibility? How is this different or the same for Black people of partial Native ancestry? Is there a legitimate calling from the ancestors which draws us into connection with Native spirituality? How do we sort through the culture's racist and distorted images to find access to something we can rely on? Does biological heritage make a difference here, or is our adoption into White or Black culture the primary kinship in which we must make community?

And for those of any descent, how does ancestry influence spirituality? How does it shape our spiritual and ethical responsibilities? What about those women who were adopted or in some way cut off from their biological roots? What is the interplay between biology and community and spirituality? What about for those who have been abused by their kin? How do gay and lesbian people reconstitute family and kin in the face of rejection for sexual orientation? Are there certain responsibilities for those who go between various cultures and classes of people?

Despite the complexity of these issues which are raised, I believe the journey we embark on is not so difficult or unwieldy. It is rooted in a commitment to the life of the people, and a trust that we are not alone. In closing, I would like to remember the advice offered by the Menominee two-spirit poet, Chrystos:

Take nothing you cannot return  
Give to others      give more  
Walk quietly      Do what needs to be done  
Give thanks for your life  
Respect all beings  
simple  
& it doesn't cost a penny<sup>14</sup>



and lived in idyllic harmony close to the earth, the Indian of the Thanksgiving stories who helped the Pilgrims survive. These images are embedded deeply in our culture, and are a subliminal backdrop to any of our interactions with Native people or concepts.

When we hear about Indians sharing spiritual wisdom with White people, they call to mind this second stereotype, the friendly noble Indian. When we hear the anger of Indians, it is easy for the first stereotype Indian to re-emerge, the hostile savage. We might feel angry or defensive or fearful.

It is important to realize that these images are really fantasies - projections of fears and dreams of White people onto those perceived as "other." While the second image, the noble spiritual wise Indian, might seem to be an improvement on the first, it is actually also harmful to Native people. So for any of us with some desire to learn more about Native people, the first layer we encounter is this layer of distortion, like a mask which obscures the voices and experiences of actual Native peoples.

What is called "Native American spirituality" in various New Age movement settings is actually a part of this distorted image. So-called "Native American spirituality" draws on the "Noble Savage" stereotype, mixed with

elements of symbol and ritual from various actual Native religious practices. What interests us about these Indians might be the way they are portrayed as having a spiritual world view, while mainstream culture seems increasingly secular. We might be looking for an emphasis on female deities and positive roles for women, or a focus on the earth, grounded in the interconnectedness of all beings. Men have seen the Indian as an image of manhood to be reclaimed.

These can all be important visions, and contain elements of truth. But the mask is still a mask. Andrea Smith, Cherokee activist and member of Women of All Red Nations, points out,

The 'Indian ways' that these white, new-age 'feminists' are practicing have very little basis in reality. ...these new agers do not understand Indian people or our struggles for survival and thus can have no genuine understanding of Indian spiritual practices.<sup>2</sup>

OF COURSE, I didn't know any of this right away. I mentioned that spirituality had led me into political activism. As part of my journey, I was also drawn into political activity with Native people. It was in this context that I began to learn about the lives and issues faced by actual Native Americans. I learned about the continued theft of the land and displacement of its inhabitants. I learned about forced acculturation through forbidding people to practice their religions, sending their children to boarding schools, and forbidding them to speak their languages. I learned about the mining of coal and uranium on reservations with disregard for the consequences on the lives of the communities there. And on and on.

I also learned about the reclamation of Indian pride and identity and the history of resistance to genocide. I learned about current resistance: A.I.M. and Alcatraz and the Wounded Knee occupation. I learned about people like Anna Mae Pictou Aquash and Leonard Peltier. Eventually, I met the Innu people of my own heritage, who have been currently engaged in a battle against the destruction of their land and way of life as they try to stop the building of a huge hydroelectric project, the Saint Marguerite 3 dam. These real people and real struggles began to cut through the stereotypes fostered by our culture, and help me to understand about Native American realities today.

What are the consequences and responsibilities we have if we have become implicated in these powers? What do you do if the spirits have claimed you?

What about those who have participated in some way in Native rituals? What are the implications of that? One of the principles of many Native traditions is the belief that knowledge equals responsibility. So some of the dangers of these rituals are the ways in which we are implicated by them. How have we taken on commitments and responsibilities which we might not even be aware of? I think of the old movies where the explorer takes a bowl of soup from the pretty Native maiden and discovers in the ensuing hours that he has married her without knowing it. What have we committed ourselves to unawares, and what should we do about it now? Also, what about those who have participated in distorted or muddled ceremonies? Are there purifications that should be done?

What do we do in the context of multicultural settings of women, when we seek to create ritual among us? There has been a mingling of peoples and cultures, with beneficent as well as oppressive links. What ceremonies can hold us all, honor us all, respect the pain between us? I believe that finding and sharing our own ancestral resources might be one step, but then what? If White women turn to our own ancestral traditions only, how are we being different from racist segregationists? How do we recognize our interrelatedness with all peoples, as well as the brokenness between us? Is it possible to create a way to pray together to bring us power for the struggles we face together? As we create real instances of multicultural linking do the "rules" change?

Can a Puerto Rican-American, a Jewish-American, a Scandinavian-American, an African-American, and a Native American do ritual together as women? What about a group which is 80% White women, with 20% women of color from various cultures? If Native women want to keep ceremony only in a Native context, given the appropriation which is rampant, is there a way for White, Black, Asian, and Latina women to honor the situation? If some Native women want to share ritual or teach, and others don't, how do we approach that? Are we attaching a higher standard of authority for Native women, while we let White or Black women be "spiritual teachers" with no authority but their own?

What about those of us who are of partial Native ancestry, but were raised in White culture with White privilege? What is our heritage and our

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE BEGUN this journey, I would also like to offer some further questions and reflections which have emerged on this path of creating anti-racist woman-valuing earth-centered spiritualities. For this paper, I can merely give voice to some of the issues which are raised, in the hope of sparking further discussion.

What does it mean for an earth-centered spirituality, that the particular land on which we live is stolen land? What about the grief of the land for her original people? Are there ways to be welcomed here? This is the land of our birth, perhaps for many generations. I believe we do belong on the earth, she is the mother of us all. But how do we live here with honor? Is it the responsibility of all of us who love this land to restore her original people?

It seems to me that the land in all her specificity - this stream, that mountain, that group of trees - not only has been stolen. She has also been kidnapped from a people who regarded land as unownable and possessed of consciousness which demanded respect, and enslaved into the hands of a people who has reduced her from "person" to "property." How can the earth be our goddess when we have made her our property? The very idea of ownership of land goes against the ethic of an earth-based spirituality. It seems to me that there are parallels here with White society's capacity to sustain the ownership of people as slaves. When we live in a culture which takes for granted the ownership of land, what is our power as individuals to alter that? In this country even having access to land can be a privilege of comparative wealth. Do we have any power to free land from ownership?

What does it mean that we live in a culture which is polluting and destroying the land? Concrete, buildings, chemicals, pesticides, monocrop agriculture and many other aspects of our culture upset the balance of nature. Our food comes from far away, and through an industrialized process that makes use of other animals and plants. What is our responsibility to the earth's environment?

There may be non-Indian persons who feel they have been visited by Native spirits. What if the power is really there? One of the reasons the traditional elders withhold access is because of the dangers of certain powers if they are not in a proper balance. So if we really believe the powers exist, it seems that one step is to acknowledge the depth of it, not play games with it.

In this way I began to see the vast differences between what was being promoted as "Native American spirituality" and what was actually true for Native peoples' lives. These differences are not something that can be corrected with more accurate recordings of ceremonies or better teachers. Rather, they are about context and underlying values. They are about power and a history of colonialism.

It is important to look at the bigger context for these questions. We get used to thinking of ethics as an individual matter, where good intentions are uppermost, and right or wrong is something we each of us choose. These are important, but there is another way of thinking about ethics which I find helpful here. That is social ethics-looking at the structures of society and their impact on people. The context here is structural racism.

Structural racism is a system of oppression in which the structures of society are operated and controlled by White people. Racism combines prejudice against people of color with political, economic, and social power over their lives. Racism is in the air we breathe. It is not so much about individual guilt or innocence, as it is an atmosphere of injustice with which we all have to reckon in some way.

We live in a colonialist society. It was built upon the European theft of land. It was built by conquering and destroying the nations of people already here, and it continues its assault on Native lands and culture. This isn't something we chose, but something we inherited, and thus have to reckon with.

It is in this context that Native Americans identify the use of Native symbols and ceremonies as cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is a form of racism. Cultural appropriation is a weapon in the process of colonization. Cultural appropriation is when a dominating or colonizing people take over the cultural and religious ceremonies and articles of a people experiencing domination or colonization. When Euro-Americans take Native American symbols and ceremonies and use them for our own purposes, we are participating in the process of colonization and the destruction of Native culture.

Janet McCloud, Tulalip elder and fishing rights activist, tells us,

First they came to take our land and water, then our fish and game. ...Now they want our religions as well. All of a sudden, we have a lot of unscrupulous idiots running around saying

they're medicine people. And they'll sell you a sweat lodge ceremony for fifty bucks. It's not only wrong, its obscene. Indians don't sell their spirituality to anybody, for any price. This is just another in a very long series of thefts from Indian people and, in some ways, this is the worst one yet.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural appropriation is a theft from a people, and also a distortion, a lie spread about a people. It is an assault on the cultural integrity of Native people, and ultimately threatens even the survival of Native people.

WHEN WE LIVE in the history of this theft and domination, how do we get to a place of positive connection or cultural sharing? Unfortunately, sincerity is not enough. As I see it, there are three different traps we can fall into as we attempt to reckon with Native American people.

## DENIAL

The first trap is denial. European settlers on this continent had a view of a divinely ordained progress: it was their destiny to take over Native lands. This view is currently maintained through the premise that Native Americans benefit by being assimilated into White culture. For people who are enjoying the privileges of White society, there can be a strong tendency toward this belief. But for Native people, the view is different. They can see the wounds and scars of oppression every day.

Denial also creates the myth that Native people don't exist anymore. They are often referred to as the dying race. If Indians are seen as only part of the past, White people can justify moving on, living only in the now. We can justify taking or using artifacts from Native culture as a way of preserving them. When Native people break the silence about injustices, or even assert their existence, they cut through the cultural denial. And the response of the officials has often been increasingly destructive silencing.

Cultural denial has similarities to the process of denial in individuals. When someone is an abuser, and hurts a victim, there is a psychological propensity to scapegoat the victim, and to deny one's own culpability. There is a belief that if the victim can be destroyed, the guilt can be destroyed.

Even if justice-minded people don't get caught in this trap of blatant denial, there are two other traps which are more subtle. These traps can obscure situations of cultural exploitation and make them appear honorable.

IF THERE ARE TWO THINGS I could impress upon your hearts, I hope you will take these with you: the choice to become allies and the choice to do our own spiritual work. I hope that you might honor the desire in your hearts, the interest in things Indian, and use it to really learn about Native lives and struggles. Use it to cut through the stereotypes, find out the deeper realities, and then to use the power you have to act in solidarity with Native people. I also hope that you might trust in our ability to do our own spiritual work, trust that we can find a way to do it with each other. I ask you to believe with me that the spirit is here in our midst.



our own spiritual and communal work, bear our own spiritual “children.” For some that may mean going back to the distress which sent us searching in the first place, to see what’s going on in a deeper way. We need to acknowledge our own oppression, so that we are able to fight our own political and spiritual battles. We need to find or create our own ceremonies for our struggles. This too can be a life-long journey. And why not? To take our own spiritual path seriously is to honor our place in the universe and the importance of our lives.

AT THIS POINT, some might still ask the question, are there any times when it might be appropriate for non-Indians to take part in Native rituals and ceremonies? The answer is complex, since it involves cutting through the stereotypes and understanding certain dimensions of Native religions, differences which are often overlooked.

“Indian religions are community based, not proselytizing religions.” [Andrea Smith]<sup>11</sup> They tie together the heart and life of a specific group of people. In contrast, many of us are more familiar with religions like Christianity or Islam, which have an evangelizing impulse which encourages the conversion of others to their way of belief.<sup>12</sup> Indian religions are not something one can convert to, as one might to Christianity, by adopting a set of beliefs or principles. Indian religions are built upon systems of relationships.

So, if one is entering into relationship with Indian people, participating in an Indian community’s life and struggles, often one will be included in various elements of ritual or spiritual life. For example, when White people have joined in activities protesting the building of the hydro-dam on Innu land, they participated with Innu people in ceremonies and prayers which were part of the struggle. White people have also become a part of Indian community through marriage or friendship.

This is not the same as White people adopting Indian spiritual practices; rather it reflects the power of the community to adopt, to make relationship with a person. Paula Gunn Allen, Laguna Pueblo author and teacher, sums it up by saying, “You cannot do Indian spirituality without an Indian community. ...it’s physical and social and spiritual and they’re fused together.”<sup>13</sup> **It is our link with Native people as allies and friends which creates a spiritual relationship, rather than a spiritual rip-off.**

## WANTING TO BE INDIAN

One of these traps I refer to as “wanting to be Indian.” In fact, American Indians have a name for people in this trap, the Wannabe Indians. This trap is an identification with the Indians, most likely out of our own distress or oppression, our disenfranchised desire. Indians become the “utopic other” holding the dreams we wish were true, whatever they may be. And here the romantic stereotypes take over. So for example, we might say, “In tribal cultures...women were held in respect.” “In tribal cultures...everything was shared communally.” “In tribal cultures...people lived in harmony with the earth.” And so on, filling in the blanks. We desire that utopia, want to be those romanticized Indians.

## GUILT SEEKING REDEMPTION

The other similar trap I call “guilt seeking redemption.” In this trap, we are aware of and acknowledge what White culture has done and reject that, but get stuck in the feeling of guilt. We desire release from the guilt of association with White culture. And so we seek out Indians to say we’re okay, to offer forgiveness, and welcome us, adopt [us] into their own better ways.

We can see an example of this trap in current movies about Indians. Movies went from those portraying Indians as the bad guys who threatened the survival of the White heroes, to a movie like “Dances with Wolves,” where the White hero is the exception to the destructiveness of White culture, and is adopted by the Indians. This trap explains the appeal of an Indian like Sun Bear who taught spirituality to White people, and started a non-Indian entity called the Bear Tribe. He was considered a sell-out by many traditional Native people. However, many White people felt welcomed and assumed a new identity as “tribal” members of a so-called Rainbow Tribe.

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS with these three traps?

First of all, this redemption we find is really a cheap grace. It makes us feel better but doesn’t transform the situation of Native peoples. The injustices keep happening.

Secondly, by denying the spiritual and political autonomy of Indian people, the New Age “rainbow” people subvert whatever good intentions they may have about multi-cultural community. What gets created is multi-cultural white middle class dominance in yet another form.

Thirdly, these options perpetuate the fantasy image of the Indian, and distort the real picture. They prevent us from seeing the real lives of Native people. They obscure and drown out their voices and expression of self. Pam Colorado, Oneida activist, says,

“The process is ultimately intended to supplant Indians, even in areas of their own customs and spirituality. In the end, non-Indians will have complete power to define what is and is not Indian, even for Indians. We are talking here about an absolute ideological/conceptual subordination of Indian people in addition to the total physical subordination they already experience. When this happens, the last vestiges of real Indian society and Indian rights will disappear. Non-Indians will then “own” our heritage and ideas as thoroughly as they now claim to own our land and resources.”<sup>4</sup>

## THE MOTHER GODDESS OF EUROPE

Let me present another example to help distinguish cultural appropriation from appropriate cultural sharing. This example is from European history and may speak to White women interested in feminist criticism of male-dominated spiritualities. Cultural appropriation is one of the ancient tools of domination and colonization. It has been going on throughout history, whenever one culture has attempted to conquer another. Battles are not fought only by the force of arms, but also by images and ideas. Any context of domination will include such cultural imperialism.

Many feminist scholars have pointed to evidence suggesting that there were early female images of divinity throughout “pre-historic” Europe. According to some scholars, the Catholic church took the image of the great mother goddess, and incorporated it as the virgin Mary, Mother of God. It used her early sacred sites for building its shrines to Mary. The church absorbed many such pagan symbols, yet distorted and transformed their meaning and their impact on the lives of the people.

The shift of context, control, and usage created important shifts of meaning and power. The conquerors took what had been an image of empowerment and valuing of women and turned it into an image promoting female acquiescence to male pre-eminence. They were able then to redefine female goodness as obedience, humility, and renunciation of sexual

When we fantasize Indian religion, we might imagine a community of greater belonging and interconnection. We need to explore the links of spirit to community, ask ourselves, Who is my community? How do we negotiate the world together? Where do we find our power? What breaks us apart? What gives us meaning? What is our relationship to the world around us?

We also see in so-called Indian spirituality a link to ancestors, to tradition. We are hungry for this link to ancestors. Native people have encouraged us to explore the earth-centered traditions of our own ancestors. Some might object that those traditions are too hard to find, too far away. Yet often there are remnants so close we don’t notice them. For example, the celebration of Christmas contains countless elements from the ancient ceremonies of the Yule, the Winter Solstice: lights in the night, evergreen trees, gift-giving, reindeers pulling sleighs through the sky, a grandfather of generosity who comes from the north, who comes into the house through the hearth chimney, carols, elves, the four canded circle of the advent wreath, the special ham dinner...all of these were once imbued with sacred meanings and powers—perhaps to be reclaimed.

I think it is also important for White women to acknowledge the fears and risks involved in exploring a woman-valuing Euro-descent spirituality. European Christian history includes the destruction of the earth-centered religions and the women who held roles of wisdom and spiritual power. Perhaps millions of women accused of being witches were burned and tortured. We carry in our collective European psyche the memory of this gynocide [sic]. While the fantasy image of the “Indian” has been romanticized and spiritualized, the fantasy image of the “witch” is as sinister and belittling as ever, despite the occasional “good witch of the North.”

When I face my spiritual ancestry as a European descent woman, I face this loss, this tremendous assault on female power and value, perpetrated upon us by my own people. To embrace woman-valuing spirituality that is Euro-based implies a rebellion against the dominant “spirit-world” of Euro-Christianity. For White women, we must ask ourselves how the word “witch” is used against us, and whether we might reclaim the word, to bring this rebellious aspect of our search into the open. There is a risk in this and tremendous power.

If we jump into a quick fix “Indian spirituality” we end up neglecting the real and serious spiritual questions in our own lives, in our own communities. By turning away from using others as surrogates, we are able to do

level, cultural sharing will not be possible until we end racism. In the meantime, only when we wholeheartedly join the struggle to end racism, and all oppression, can we begin to experience cultural sharing.

The second part of what we can do is to do our own spiritual work. When we put Indians into the stereotype of spiritual gurus, or “utopic other”, we use them like spiritual surrogates. When we use someone as a surrogate, we occupy them in a way which prevents them from bearing their own children. Native spiritualities have a purpose in the communities in which they originate. They are fundamental for the Native cultural struggle against genocide. They are not empty symbols into which we can put our struggles, use them, for example, for the empowerment of women, or an affirmation of male bonding.<sup>10</sup>

Since we have projected an image onto the Indian, one part of doing our own spiritual work is to bring back that image into ourselves. We can use the “Indian” stereotype which we have created to learn about our selves. What do we see there? Can it teach us what we are hungry for? What do we long for? If we recognize it as a projection, we can use the stereotype “Indian” to help us do our own spiritual work.

The image “Indian” holds for us the idea of mysticism and spirituality. We live a society which seems to give us a choice between secularism or a rigidly-defined male God. Part of what feeds cultural appropriation is a deep spiritual hunger in White people. This sense of starvation is very real, but we must realize: *Native people are not keeping us from spirit.* White culture has broken and disrupted its own spiritual heritage. If we believe there is such a thing as spirit, we can recreate a path to it, we can hope that it will help us in that process. I believe our desire itself, our desire for spirit, is a powerful magic which can open the doorway for us.

In popular consciousness, the “Indian” is seen as linked to the earth and other species. We are hungry for this connection. But, in reality, we all live here on this earth, our lives equally enmeshed with the fate of countless other beings around us. These beings can teach us if we are quiet with them. Connect directly with the source. We can pay attention as we walk in the woods, or on a city block. We need to trust that we can begin where we are, who we are, in our own lives. What are the animals and plants we rely on? What feeds us? How can we honor that gift? How can we give back?

energy. To capture and transform the image of goddess in this way served to further solidify the subjugation of women and undermine ideas fostering resistance.

## THE VISION QUEST OF THE LAKOTA

How is this similar to the cultural appropriation of Native images and practices by the New Age movement? I will use the example of one practice, the “vision quest,” a ritual found in Lakota culture (with variations in many other Native nations), which is now offered for a price in many New Age contexts. In traditional Lakota culture, the vision quest was a time of fasting and prayer in the mountains, and fit into the unfolding of a person’s role within their community. The elders of the community sent the individual forth with prayers, and received them back offering interpretation of their visions and guidance for living out their implications. The context was a belief that the person’s individual life and calling was a gift for the whole group, and their connection to the spirit world would bring them into deeper connection with the community, bringing life to the community. Each existed in balance with the other.<sup>5</sup>

When this ritual is brought into a New Age context, its meaning and power are altered. The focus shifts to White people’s needs and visions, which in most New Age venues are about individual growth and prosperity. There is no accountability to a community, particularly any Native community. Rather, White people get to experience their own distorted idea of being spiritual and “Indian,” without any sense of the responsibility which is fundamental to Native religion.

The form and structure of the ritual itself have been changed. For example, the giving and receiving of the Native way are transformed into buying and selling, a sacrilege in Native contexts. The use of images of wild animals and plants by urban White vision-questers trivializes the wholeness of the intimate relationship of a community to a specific region of land, and the inhabitants therein who provide food, clothing, inspiration and survival.

There is no harm in White people’s retreating into solitary places for spiritual insight and growth. This has been a part of most religious traditions. So the popularity of calling such a retreat a “vision quest” comes from the commodification of Native Americans as the latest consumer fad. By turning Indians into commodities, they are incorporated into capitalism’s way of perceiving and valuing reality. Their own perceptions and values are

thus undermined. What is called “Indian spirituality” has actually become a distortion. These words then cannot be relied on, they have been warped to fit another agenda. By this, the attempt to hold onto authentic Indian spiritualities has been rendered more difficult.

What are some of the effects of this warped agenda on Native people? The actual realities of Native communities are erased. Native communities have been under assault for 500 years, and are facing issues of dislocation, continued theft of land, poverty, unemployment, addiction, suicide, and despair. In Native communities, the recovery of traditional practices such as the vision quest helps build identity and community pride, helps empower Native communities for life struggles against a racist mainstream. If these ceremonies are diluted by misuse in White America, the communities are weakened in their struggles for survival.

SO TO SUMMARIZE, White people finding themselves interested in Native Americans first have to deal with the stereotype image Indian, a projection of White fears and hopes which is an undercurrent to any understanding we seek. We have to reckon with an inheritance of White colonialism and a context of structural racism. In such a context sincere spiritual searchers face three traps which can short circuit ethical right relations between White people and Native people: denial, wanting to be Indian, and guilt seeking redemption. But what can we do? I believe there is a response which offers an ethic we can stand on. It has two parts: become an ally and do our own spiritual work.

The first part is to become an ally. If you are familiar with the twelve step programs you may have heard of “making amends.” This means that it is important to take stock of one’s past and take responsibility for righting the wrongs that one can. I believe this can also function on a cultural level. To take responsibility on a cultural level would be to identify one’s cultural location and the realities of colonialism and structural racism. To take responsibility includes acknowledging the problem as bigger than individual guilt or innocence. In other words, we didn’t individually cause this injustice, so we don’t need to get stuck in individual guilt or shame. Rather, our responsibility is to work against racism, to be an ally to those who are oppressed.

It is important to point out that Indian people are not saying, “Don’t learn about Indian culture or religion.” Rather the appeal is that White people learn more deeply and accurately about Indian cultures and in a context which does not foster their destruction. Oren Lyons, a traditional chief of the Onondaga Nation says,

We’ve got real problems today, tremendous problems which threaten the survival of the planet. Indians and non-Indians must confront these problems together, and this means we must have honest dialogue, but this dialogue is impossible so long as non-Indians remain deluded about things as basic as Indian spirituality.<sup>6</sup>

Since there are so many distortions, information is important. We can educate ourselves and our children and friends about the issues and struggles facing Native peoples today. Help can be given beginning in forms as simple and concrete as money, or appealing to our congressional leaders to support Native religious freedom issues and land claims.

There are many community-rooted Indian writers, artists, scholars, and cultural workers we can support, for example, by buying their books instead of the New Age impostor books.<sup>7</sup>

...for those of you who want to know what Aboriginal people are like, let us tell you. Participate in our writings, feel our visual art, move with our music, hear in your heart our stories.”  
-Joy Asham Fedorick<sup>8</sup>

Native people need allies. White people have a choice. We can pretend there is no problem. We can get stuck in grief or guilt about what has happened. Or we can use our privilege as White people as a resource for Native peoples’ needs and concerns. Audre Lorde, an African American poet and justice worker said, “Use what power you have to work for what you believe in.”<sup>9</sup> The process of learning and responding will in itself be a life-long spiritual journey.

Cultural sharing involves interaction with the whole of a person and community, reciprocal giving and receiving, sharing of struggle as well as joy, receiving what the community wants to give, not what we want to take. Cultural sharing begins in respect, with patience not to make assumptions but to risk stepping outside of our own frame of reference. On a fundamental