

*The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*

Jodi A. Byrd

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Undergraduate courses in both critical race and ethnic studies and postcolonial theory have always presented me with a pedagogical dilemma. I teach at a small university in Canada renowned nationally for its Indigenous Studies Department and, as a result, find it necessary to read the key texts in these courses constantly “against the grain.” Where are the scholars I could include who interrogate not only the erasure of Indigenous peoples in postcolonial theory but also their homogenization within the category of the “multicultural other” in critical theory and cultural studies? Having now read Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd’s important contribution to the field of American Indian and Indigenous Studies *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, I have my answer. This Indigenous-centered critique of the multiple forms of US imperialism highlights the absent presence of Native American histories, cultures, and peoples in Euro-Western theory from this century as well as the last. Why should “the economies of racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism” (xxvi), she asks, trump a critical engagement with the material oppression and colonization of Native Americans? The purpose of her analysis, however, is not to position Indigenous peoples as victims; instead, it serves to “activate indigeneity as a condition of possibility within cultural and critical theory” (xxxix).

I am equally gratified by Byrd’s original intervention into the growing scholarly literature on contemporary American multicultural liberalism. As she notes, the multicultural state implicitly denies the special rights of American Indians, especially their right to self-government, as it seeks to homogenize all minorities into the other of the US settler self. In addition, she argues that their identities have lost their historical and cultural specificities with the advent of multiculturalism in the 1980s and the “postracial ideologies of the 2000s” (209). During this period, American Indians were renamed “Native Americans,” and their identities were subsumed into those of other American minorities. As Byrd explains, the new term Native American “paralleled the politically correct categorization of other racial and ethnic minorities who now belong in the United States—African Americans, Asian Americans, Italian Americans” (209).

Throughout *The Transit of Empire*, much is expected of Byrd’s reader as her methodology “places disparate histories, temporalities, and

geographies into conversation” (xiii)—one marked by cacophony rather than dialogue. The result is often a disorienting reading experience. The struggle, however, is worth it. This intellectually-demanding, yet compelling text acts as a contradictory scene of instruction that both foregrounds and traces in a non-linear fashion the multiple episodes of material and epistemic colonial violence enacted by US settler society, both internally and globally, since the Enlightenment. For Byrd, the concept of “transit” as a tool of analysis has a double meaning. First, she deploys it to argue that reiterative stereotypes circulating in the discourse on Indigeneity strategically fill the empty signifier of the “other” in the US colonialist project. As she explains, cultural representations of immigrants to the US—a category including American Indians, as well as the Japanese after Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima, among other examples—are contaminated by these discursive images. This strategy, in its disciplining and domesticating of the US “other,” acts as a most effective tool of colonization. As Byrd notes, these powerful images are constantly moving, playing out across time and place and, as a result, enabling both US empire building and the violent appropriation of American-Indian lands and cultures. Indigeneity, therefore, “becomes a site through which US empire orients and replicates itself” (xiii). Byrd also uses the concept of “transit” to foreground the evolution of Indigenous peoples and their identities throughout American history, thereby actively resisting the mainstream notion that they exist in the past tense, belonging in museums rather than on the streets and lands of contemporary North America.

Byrd demonstrates an authoritative, wide-ranging familiarity with some of the most important Euro-Western theorists from this and the last century. Thus, *The Transit of Empire* offers a new, groundbreaking example of what the late Choctaw, Cherokee and Irish critic and author, Louis Owens, has termed a “mixed-blood” text. By incorporating, critiquing, and indeed appropriating critical and cultural theory, it resists “the dialectics of settler/native, master/slave, colonizer/colonized that all too often inform calls for reparations and decolonization” (xxxvii). Certainly, such binary thinking, a trademark of Western forms of cultural colonization, is inscribed in much of the writing in the field. Canon builders during the 1990s such as Lakota writer, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Cherokee scholar, Jace Weaver, and Osage critic and author, Robert Warrior, adopted a form of tribal nationalism—one that required American Indian scholars to rely only on Indigenous forms of knowledge in their critical writing. An “Us and Them” mentality resulted that continues today. Byrd brilliantly undercuts this thinking, appropriating Euro-Western critical theory in order to celebrate Southwestern Indigenous philosophy and traditional knowledge. Such appropriation has always been an indispensable tool of resistance, its deployment working to revitalize rather than assimilate Indigenous cultures. This strategy, according to Byrd, also characterizes the work of a younger generation of scholars such as Dale Turner (Teme-Augama Anishnabai), Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), and Chris Anderson (Michif), for example. The most

recent writing of Warrior also destabilizes the native/settler dichotomy by calling for a conversation between their different philosophies and the need for “both an inward and outward turn” by Indigenous intellectuals (xxviii). A foremost scholar to whom Byrd turns in *The Transit of Empire* is the Anishnabai theorist, storyteller, and poet Gerald Vizenor, whose “mixed-blood” texts offer a similar display of authority in their engagement with and appropriation of Euro-Western theory.

Byrd’s *Transit of Empire* deserves to be included in this canon of writers in the emergent field of American Indian and Indigenous Studies. While I know my students will struggle to engage with this highly theoretical text and its mind-bending methodology, Byrd has convinced me that their subsequent intellectual and, indeed, emotional headaches are a necessary part of her project of decolonization (xxvi). “Indigenous decolonization,” as she argues, “restores life and allows settler, arrivant, and native to apprehend and grieve together the violence of U.S. empire” (229). For my students then, along with us all, sorrow and pain are part of the journey we must take towards restorative justice for Indigenous peoples in North America.