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JOHN TRUDELL AND THE SPIRIT OF LIFE

“My ride showed up.”

—Posted to John Trudell’s Facebook page just after he passed.

The Santee Sioux activist, political philosopher, and poet/musician John Trudell died of cancer on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015. I was sitting in my office when I read the news. His death had been reported erroneously four days before, so it didn’t come as a complete surprise. Nevertheless, I experienced the same kind of sadness I felt when John Lennon died, as though, somehow, I had lost someone close to me even though we had never met. Trudell’s work had inspired me. He fought fearlessly for tribal rights. He also reached across class, gender, and racial lines in order to draw public attention to the oppressive treatment of indigenous people as a symptom of a larger ruling class imperative to colonize the western world. In numerous poems, speeches, and songs, he argues that western society has lost touch with what he calls the “spirit of life.” Industrial capitalism has led to the fall of western society’s natural relationship to the earth. The value of human life no longer resides in the reality that we are made of the earth. Instead it depends on advancing the interests of the very historical forces that had perpetrated our “spiritual genocide.” This learned disrespect for the earth cuts us off from the ancestral knowledge of what it means to be a human being. Trudell claims that we must rediscover this knowledge if we intend to take back the land from the ruling class. Only through reestablishing our place in the natural order of the world can we liberate ourselves from the diseased thinking and behaviors that have resulted in class division, environmental destruction, racism, sexism, and global war.

Trudell points to industrial capitalism as the stimulus for the United States’ policies that have informed U.S.-Indian relations. It was the precise articulation of this observation that encouraged me to include his poetry, music, speeches, and a documentary about his life in an upper-level literature and film course I was designing on the American West. His work would help me to establish westward expansion as an economic development intended to exploit environmental resources and create new consumer and labor markets, whatever the cost to tribal communities and their lands. His analysis of the long history of broken U.S.-Tribal treaties indicted the United States on what he believed to be criminal activity. This particular argument laid the groundwork for considering the legality of a variety of U.S. policies and practices under the constitution that resulted in conditions like the current reservation system and ultimately led to the corporate pillaging of the earth.

I also thought that interviews with him about his life as an activist and poet/musician would personalize to some extent Trudell's struggle to achieve Indian sovereignty, as well as emphasize the success he found as an artist. By extension, I could provide a more comprehensive experiential context for the oppressive conditions that necessitated that struggle as they were expressed in other course-related indigenous texts. I could then mark the philosophical similarities and differences among these texts and the assigned nonindigenous texts in order to demonstrate some of the cultural complexities constituted by them. But above all I wanted my students to learn from Trudell. His political philosophy would introduce them to ideas that they had never considered. Despite staggering personal tragedy, he advocated for tribal rights and the natural rights of all people. His creative work expressed a deep spiritual relationship to the earth and its people. I hoped that these aspects of Trudell's life would inspire my students to deepen their knowledge of U.S.-Indian history, broaden as well as sharpen their political perspectives, and motivate them to consider the potential for social change through activism.

Trudell became a nationally recognized figure as a member of the Indians of All Tribes group that occupied Alcatraz Island from November 20, 1969 to June 11, 1970. Throughout the 1970s, as national chairman of the American Indian Movement (AIM), Trudell gave voice to what he called the awakening of a "native consciousness." In a collective effort, native peoples sought to reclaim over 110 million acres of land seized by the United States and demand that the American government honor its treaties with tribes and restore tribal rights.<sup>1</sup> Along with grassroots organizing in places like the Shoshone-Paiute Reservation in Duck Valley, Nevada, where he and his wife, Tina, fought for treaty and water rights, Trudell participated in historic political protests, such as AIM's 1972 occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building in Washington, D.C. Over the years, his eloquent, impassioned speeches inspired many to take action against the government, protect the land from corporate invasions, and honor the earth. As the long list of recent tributes attests, his personal interaction with individuals compelled many of them to become, as *Counterpunch's* Michael Donnelly put it, "better human(s)."

A turning point in Trudell's life came on February 12, 1979 when Tina and their three children, along with his mother-in-law, were killed in a suspicious house fire. In *Agents of Repression*, Ward Churchill claims that Trudell believed the fire was "set up" by the FBI in retaliation for his work with AIM and to silence his public response to the "reign of terror," a pattern of government influenced violence on the Pine Ridge reservation between 1973 and 1976.<sup>2</sup> The fire took place just twelve hours after Trudell had burned the American flag on the steps of the BIA, an unlikely coincidence that seems to support Trudell's belief. An eyewitness who claimed he saw a line of fire across the house's roof also lends credibility to Trudell's suspicions. Trudell would later say, however, that Tina's death might have also been retaliation for her activism on the Duck Valley reservation (*Trudell*). She had been working for tribal water rights at the Wild Horse Reservoir and "came up against severe resistance from local BIA officials, Elk County and Nevada state officials, members of the water recreation industry, and local ranchers" (Lucid). Whoever was responsible, the FBI never investigated the fire. The BIA claimed it was accidental, but the private arson specialist Trudell hired found that the BIA's account was highly implausible. The case remains unsolved.

From that point forward Trudell began to write poetry that he would later put to music. Claiming that Tina had given him "the lines to follow," Trudell started to write as a way to deal with his grief:

My poetry was born out of the rage of losing my family, but also out of pain, clarity and confusion. My whole life experience, when bad things happen, poetry exploded out of me. I've been told that people perceive anger in my work. I don't have a problem with anger. Fear and courage are part of the natural process. I didn't discover my poetic gift. It discovered me. (Kupfer)

Publishing his first collection of poems, *Living in Reality: Songs Called Poems, Society of the People Struggling to be Free*, in 1982, Trudell earned encouraging reviews. He would later publish two more books – mixtures of poetry, lyrics, and contemplations: *Stickman: Poems, Lyrics, Talks*, in 1999 and *Lines from a Mined Mind: The Words of John Trudell*, in 2008—that demonstrated his skill as a poet and keen social critic.

His music, however, brought him the most public attention. Trudell released seventeen albums. Combining traditional tribal music and the blues with spoken word poetry, he developed a unique sound that many influential musicians such as Bob Dylan and Kris Kristofferson praised. The 1986 album *AKA Grafitti Man* (sic), recorded with renowned Kiowa guitarist Jesse Ed Davis, earned him Grammy nominations in 1987 in the Best Word and Best Rock Duo categories (Dylan called it the album of the year). Trudell toured with the Australian band Midnight Oil in 1988 and took part in Peter Gabriel's WOMAD (World Music and Dance) production in 1993. In the process, he became the one of the most commercially recognized indigenous recording artists of all time.

Along with turning to poetry and music, Trudell moved his activism toward a wider variety of social and environmental issues. He began speaking at benefits, gatherings, and environmental protests. While never straying far from his concerns about the U.S. government's treatment of native peoples, he combined a precise critique of capitalism and western industrial society with a spiritual expression of respect for the earth and *all* its inhabitants. His address at the Survival Gathering in the Black Hills of South Dakota, in 1980, for example, organized by the Black Hills Alliance, a unique coalition of white and native people, outlined how the U.S. government and its corporate allies intended to colonize the country's white citizens through various ideological strategies. Relying on institutions like the church and the education system to define their “consumer . . . political . . . religious . . . and racial identities,” white people have become dehumanized forms of exploitation, going so far as to see their own births and deaths commodified. In addresses and speeches like this one, Trudell encouraged people of all races to recognize how industrial capitalism had created the context for a form of cultural hegemony that left them feeling powerless and socially insignificant (1).

The most complete articulation of the development of Trudell's creative and political thought comes in Heather Rae's 2005 documentary, *Trudell*. The film chronicles the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional life of Trudell and offers a portrait of a charismatic leader whose ability to render clearly and eloquently the hegemonic priorities of the United States led the FBI to identify him as “extremely dangerous.”<sup>3</sup> Beyond Trudell's political intelligence and verbal eloquence lies a man deeply committed to living a meaningful life, despite the many hardships he has faced. He projects a spiritual energy – perhaps his spirit of life – that legitimates the conviction of his ideas. In Rae's portrayal, Trudell is mischievous, feisty, sad, funny, sincere, and above all, reflective and insightful. Most everything that has been written about him confirms the accuracy of this portrayal. In the documentary, Trudell argues that human rights and social justice cannot be achieved in a capitalist state that deploys democracy as an ideological strategy for oppression.

Democracy posits a society based on competing ideas whose collective interest lies in preserving the right of everyone to speak and act freely. But the treatment of indigenous peoples in the U.S. dispels this notion. “The wheel of genocide continues to grind,” Trudell says. “They can program and sell democracy across the world the way Hitler sold Nazism . . . but it doesn’t change anything, throughout they’re industrially insane, with no sensitivities to life or what it’s about.” Emerging out of an impulse to maximize profit, industrial capitalists have pillaged indigenous land through the ideological and practical protection of the United States government. It has publically condemned tribal resistance to these corporate invasions in the name of human progress and free enterprise, murdered people, and exploited the concept of democracy to mystify its activities.

For Trudell, the land is neither commodity nor country but that which constitutes the symbiotic relationship of all aspects of the natural world. People are meant to live in cooperation with the land rather than exploit it for profit. But industrial capitalism engenders a kind of cultural insanity in which the understanding of life comes not from symbiosis but conquest. As a predator-energy, it feeds upon the “essence of the human spirit.” Like the corporations that mine the earth, its ideology “mines our minds,” the effects of which pollute our thinking, turning us against our own best interests. This form of cultural hegemony, which, like a genetic disease, travels from generation to generation, makes possible the violent quest for land in which the destruction of the earth and the genocide of indigenous people becomes an unfortunate but necessary consequence of western civilization’s progress. “In the end,” Trudell argues, “what allows this aggressive behavior to continue is the participation of the citizens of the democracies” who no longer recognize themselves as part of the earth. In order to eliminate the system that gives rise to this thinking, the people must reclaim the land from that “sick minority [who] pervert the meaning and intention of humanity” and begin to think about solutions to living in cooperation with the earth beyond the ideological borders of industrial capitalism.

I introduced students to *Trudell* at a private Catholic college that promotes itself as an institution concerned with issues of social justice. The college’s advertising campaign focuses extensively on programs like Alternative Spring Break, Model U.N., and other student-directed activities that encourage community service. It attracts primarily white middle-class students who have attended public high schools. While there is some diversity among them, for the most part, they are liberal-minded students invested in the professional opportunities a degree will afford them. The college advances these opportunities through required internships in such professions as public education and the non-profit industry, publishing, and the medical science fields, among others. By linking its community service and social justice initiatives to required internships, the college attempts to instill a life philosophy in which the goal of work is service to others. By and large, my students participated in this culture on campus and many of them considered service work a noble plan for their future.

Some of my students saw *Trudell* as a natural extension of the college’s mission to prepare them for a life of social service. They read its historical explanation of broken U.S. treaties and the resulting environmental damage to native land as a plea for assistance. Indigenous people needed help, they argued, and *Trudell* inspired them to give it. They talked about volunteering on reservations, as some of them had already done, teaching English and mathematics to so-called under-served children. They pointed out that *Trudell* made manifest some of the reasons for global warming, which compelled them to learn how the Green Movement could improve environmental living conditions on reservations. In short, these students were appalled by the

long history of deception and murder perpetrated by the U.S. on indigenous peoples. *Trudell* was a call to action and because the college provided them with some of the resources necessary to act, they would heed that call.

But there were others who questioned the motives of these action-minded students. This cohort of students didn't see volunteering on reservations as activism or contributing to achieving social justice in the United States. They saw it as participating in the very behaviors against which the documentary warned. The action-minded students encouraged assimilation and perpetuated notions of white superiority based on their active volunteerism. Perhaps unconsciously they attempted to invade tribal culture from a seemingly benevolent perspective that left no trace of guilt. The action-minded students overlooked or ignored the documentary's indictment of capitalism and the ideological effects of American democracy. Through its account of the government's treatment of indigenous peoples the documentary demystifies the decisions and policies of the U.S. It demonstrates the impossibility of the achievement of public government, equitable affluence, and social equality that supposedly results from the opportunities provided by capitalism. How, they asked, could the U.S. claim a well-functioning democracy when it continues to conduct an intentional war against indigenous peoples? To volunteer on the reservation in order to better equip people with the skills to succeed in American society was to strengthen the practical application of the ideology that necessitated assistance in the first place.

Moreover, as an unexpected consequence, the documentary's account of democratic capitalism compelled these students to interpret the college's emphasis on social justice as a form of educational ideology. They argued that the college commodified the idea of human rights in order to attract prospective students and mystify its own corporate agenda, which included requiring many of them to take mandatory internships to graduate and a campus-wide curriculum that they believed encouraged them to become compliant mid-level corporate laborers. By extension, they saw how the current system of higher education in the U.S. promotes notions of personal freedom, class mobility, and the achievement of professional fulfillment even as it corporatizes curricula, renders the impossibility of graduation for some, and binds most students to lifelong debt, all of which compromises or even negates the alleged educational benefits listed above.

Many of the action-minded students responded by arguing that change begins on the ground. They pointed to the Suffrage and Civil Rights movements, the time and sacrifice it takes to change aspects of the system. To sit and coolly dismiss their efforts was simply to watch the world go by as the grip of the ruling class continued to get firmer. As for the educations of their counterparts, they said, it was only through higher education, and this institution in particular, that these students were able to point out the potential problems associated with it.

This debate, which took various degrees and forms, speaks to the value of *Trudell* as a tool for introducing students to the necessity and challenges of activism. As a form of pedagogy, the documentary constitutes activism itself. It inspired students to consider and actively confront institutional racism, environmental injustice, and the sociopolitical implications of ruling class ideology. Although for different reasons, most of them awakened to or strengthened their understanding of some of the violent realities of American hegemony, particularly as they have manifested in native communities. More precisely, they came to understand that the violent history of U.S.-Indian relations resulted from a colonial effort to appropriate tribal land and destroy tribal culture through whatever means necessary. They saw that this effort continues today and is often mystified through the misrepresentation or omission of historical events and a seemingly concerted cultural effort to blame indigenous people for the impoverished state

of some reservations, high rates of alcoholism and incarceration among them, the shortest life expectancy of any demographic group in the U.S, and an infant mortality rate 44 percent higher than in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

The spirited discussions in my class about how to deal with the issues the documentary raised also led to an awareness of interpellation as the process by which my students' attitudes and values were shaped. Regardless of their position, most of them eventually saw how they upheld ideas that in practice maintained some of the issues with which they were concerned. In conflict with Trudell's charge that we cannot work within the parameters of capitalism to solve the problems it has created, they conceded at least the possibility of an alternative socio-economic and political system to end class conflict, racism and sexism, and address the environmental problems of the planet.

No matter what their position, the intensity of my students' responses speaks, I think, to two aspects of the film: on the one hand, its factual account of the broken treaties and corporate U.S. invasions of native land is irrefutable, supported significantly by historical evidence and Trudell's clear, coherent analysis of it. On the other, the documentary personalizes the realities of the struggle for native sovereignty through Trudell's involvement in the American Indian Movement. By linking the two, *Trudell* reveals the devastating effects of the policies and practices of the U.S. government and its corporate allies on indigenous peoples. In the process, it makes profound connections between such historical events as the Trail of Tears and the current reservation system. It also draws disturbing parallels between the military war tactics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century deployed against native tribes and more eco-economic tactics used throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In the end, it makes a compelling case for ongoing genocide. "We've never really seen the war go away," Trudell says. "If you're dying from the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry's bullets, or if you're dying from induced poverty and racism and class systems and sex systems, ... or someone has come [onto the reservation] in the name of maximizing profit and getting you to work in the uranium mines and you're dying from lung cancer... you're dying. It's the same as the bullet."

Before we viewed *Trudell*, I had assigned materials that offered alternative perspectives on the history of U.S.-Indian relations that many of my students had learned in high school and at the institution where I taught. Chapters from Ward Churchill's *A Little Matter of Genocide*, Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, and *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, along with short essays by William Apess and Chief Seattle and the fiction of Sherman Alexie, Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Zitkala Sa—all these provided a fuller context for understanding this history. Through this body of work, my students learned how Columbus' horrific treatment of the Arawaks was not only the barbaric actions of a rogue seafarer but also the natural consequence of colonial terrorism and a state sanctioned quest to establish an overseas empire for Spain (In an interview on *CNN*, when asked about Columbus Day, Trudell quipped, "with no disrespect to anyone, I think asking the native people to celebrate Columbus Day is like asking the American people to celebrate Osama Bin Laden Day. I actually think that terrorism arrived on this hemisphere with Columbus... I mean, how did my land become someone else's country?"). They revisited Manifest Destiny and saw how complex religio-ideological strategies created the social context for westward expansion. They considered how these strategies justified publicly the United States' violent appropriation of land and resources. By examining the long history of broken treaties that left hundreds of tribes displaced to reservations, they discovered a pattern of systemic violence that spanned hundreds of years and continued into

the present. My students recognized, perhaps not for the first time but in much clearer terms, that what they had been taught about U.S.-Indian history was shortsighted at best or intentionally dishonest and manipulative.

With a few exceptions, they had learned about Columbus as a courageous, if somewhat volatile explorer who, because he was a “man of his time,” enslaved and murdered Indians in the name of human progress (I am reminded of the astonishingly racist Michael Berliner article, “The Christopher Columbus Controversy: Western Civilization vs. Primitivism,” in which he discusses Columbus in terms of western civilization as the “objectively superior culture.”<sup>5</sup>). They were taught that the Jamestown Massacre was an unprovoked Indian attack on Virginia colonists; Manifest Destiny was the reflection of an American territorial right; the Great Sioux War was the Sioux’s savage response to a fair treaty agreement; and Indian boarding schools were institutions intended to prepare children with the tools necessary to compete in mainstream American society – if they learned any of this at all. In fact, in all the years that I included the documentary in the course not one of them had heard of John Trudell or A.I.M. Their educations had excluded specific information about the treatment of native peoples and, as a result, the resistance to that treatment. The Indians of All Tribes occupation of Alcatraz, the Longest Walk, and the stand off at Wounded Knee, for example, all came as revelations.

For the most part, my students were concerned about the gaps in their educations, particularly after Trudell and Churchill had placed much of the history noted above into the context of genocide. To their credit, I don’t think that many of them experienced what one student referred to as her “blind spot” as solely a lack of access to information. Many of them understood that these blind spots were also the mystified social spaces in which some people lived and died in conflict with the U.S. government and the values of western civilization. They recognized that we were discussing the absence of the representation of actual lived experience and death from curricula that claimed to represent American history and culture. One student suggested it was some kind of institutional payback for people who refused to accept the American way of life. Another connected the dearth of information to the reservation system. Relying on the old cliché “out of sight, out of mind,” she observed that U.S. curricula kept most Americans separated from native history in the same way that reservations kept Indians separated from mainstream America. Whatever their position, they saw evidence of something more insidious than the most intentionally disparaging representations of other races: historical erasure. Perhaps they couldn’t define it. But given their own experiences, they could not deny it either.

We talked about No Child Left Behind, standardized testing, how the corporatizing of the Academy had decimated humanities curricula, and the potential distraction and diversions provided by social media. I reminded them of some of their earlier comments about the public education system as a form of ideology – how it mystifies particular social contradictions and establishes imaginary relations to real social conditions. We also discussed Howard Zinn’s argument that public education manufactures mass deception. Zinn claims that the education system prepares students to live with the contradictions of U.S. history mostly by eliding these contradictions. It establishes the educational basis for a belief in the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and democracy, for example. But it does not provide the specific information that demonstrates how these ideals are violated. For Zinn, the U.S. education system strongly discourages analytical thought, so that students cannot identify and think through the disparity between socio-cultural ideals and their realities (120-43).

I pointed out, however, that there were alternative accounts of U.S.-Indian history available if one knew where to look. There were also colleges and universities across the country that offered a variety of courses on various native histories. Many public schools were strongly encouraged and in some cases even mandated by their states to teach these histories.<sup>6</sup> *YouTube* contained hundreds of videos of indigenous people speaking about their histories and cultural ways. Along these lines, I asked students to consider that the incomplete histories about which we were speaking also kept them from recognizing thriving indigenous communities in the present, where people continued to live within the expectations of their cultures as best they could or had found ways to assimilate positively aspects of American culture into their lives. The consequence of erasing the history of a people, I suggested, was to erase the people themselves and the evidence of their ability to survive that attempted erasure. If we stood any chance of surviving the environmental and social effects of industrial capitalism, we would need to listen to the people who were surviving and in some cases thriving despite its most aggressive assaults.

Referring back to an earlier classroom discussion not noted here, a student wondered if Trudell would have connected these educational gaps to his position that the ruling class no longer needed the assistance of the white masses to maintain its control of the land. “There is a new Indian,” Trudell says in his Black Hills address, and “the new Indian is white” (3). He claims that the global economy has eliminated the ruling class’ need to court the white underand middle-classes. They have done the dirty work necessary to assure ruling class success and have outlived their usefulness. If native history and culture provided the solution to industrial capitalism, the student mused, wouldn’t it be in its best interest to keep it from us? If Trudell was right, she suggested, they might soon find their own histories resembling the ones about which they had not been taught. Perhaps what struck me most about the discussion that followed was how powerless my students felt in the face of the history that they had just learned and Trudell’s suggestion that white America would soon be experiencing a similar fate. Even the action-minded students, who believed that they could make a difference at the community level, felt incapable of confronting the apparent strength of institutions like the education system, never mind the mainstream media and the American government. Certainly their feelings of powerlessness in response to a genocidal war against an entire people were only one of my concerns. But they did reflect, I think, the feelings of many students when confronted with new material that contradicts much of what they have learned. They also provided an opportunity for me to introduce them to Trudell’s arguments about power and liberation.

I showed them a few video clips of Trudell speaking on these issues and had them read the transcript of Trudell’s Black Hills address.<sup>7</sup> We discussed them in class as a way of completing some of the ideas expressed in the documentary. Trudell argues that whites have been deceived by the illusions of power communicated by the ruling class. They see power in terms of economics, law enforcement, and militarism. Because believing in these illusions of power necessarily requires people to subjugate themselves, they assume subservient identities that in turn confirm their powerlessness. “When I go around America and see the bulk of white people,” Trudell says, “they do not feel oppressed. They feel powerless.” He identifies any number of social movements in the U.S. intended to create equality—Suffrage, the Civil Rights movement—and points out that despite these heroic efforts the ruling class continues to control our lives. People see the efforts and the results and experience the continued control as powerlessness. For Trudell, any attempt to change the social conditions without addressing our relationship to the land is bound to produce only symptomatic changes. We cannot deal with



the oppressors on their own terms, Trudell says, by voting for change or even taking to the streets to demand it. In order to retake the land we must first honor it and our natural relationship to it. “We need to develop our loyalties to the planet,” Trudell argues, instead of the forces that are destroying it.

Trudell explains that seeing through the illusions of perceived social change is difficult, primarily because the ruling class deflects its deception by encouraging people to fight among themselves. Ageism, class division, racism and sexism maintain the lies advanced by the ruling class. Either they keep people at each other’s throats or stir symptomatic movements that divert people’s attention from recognizing their “role as natural power.” In a move that many of my students struggled to understand, Trudell connects the collective action of the people, a committed and continuous resistance to accept ruling class lies and brutality, to the natural power of the earth. “The exploitative one percent who control world economics today . . . can’t stop the wind and they can’t stop the rain. They can’t stop the earthquake and the volcano and the tornado.” Once we develop a collective “consciousness of resistance” to their mind mining and acknowledge and accept that we are beings *of* the earth who work with it and not against it, we become powerful and capable of affecting permanent change. Like the wind, we are natural energy that cannot be contained or stopped from achieving its intention, which Trudell claims, is to live free on the land. But first we must free the land, he says, in order to free ourselves (2).

We go about achieving this freedom by acknowledging our enemies. It does not matter whether we call them the Presidents of the United States or the U.S. Congress or global corporations or the military or the police. *We must* understand that these people are not our friends. The systems of oppression they maintain are designed to hurt us. “One-hundred percent of their effort goes into deceiving us and manipulating us against each other,” Trudell says. They are the enemy and they cannot be trusted, especially when they claim they can be. “There must be this consciousness,” Trudell argues, because only then “will we start to act accordingly,” by which he means developing a resistance to their lies and violent oppression, to our own fear of their retribution, to their prisons and their executions. We must develop a consciousness of resistance that we can pass on to future generations, because, as Trudell points out, the struggle will be a long one. Through this resistance we will arrive at an understanding of our natural place on the earth and begin to undertake it. It is only then that we can create the spiritual solutions that will allow us to reclaim the land and live on it harmoniously (2).

For many of my students, Trudell’s call to power was a tall order. It relies on native traditions that may be obvious to his indigenous audiences but left most of my students wondering how they might resist ruling class deception, live in cooperation with the earth, and maintain the current conditions of their lives. Some of them argued that the industrial world had become too large, too complex, and, for the most part, very efficient at providing energy. One student went so far as to argue that neither Trudell nor I knew anything about, say, nuclear energy except for the public misconceptions that demonized it. The whole conversation, he said, was ridiculous. “Besides,” he said, “how are you going to get seven-billion people to work together?” Charges of primitivism and idealism surfaced – in respectful but nevertheless antagonistic ways. Given the condition of the world, some of them argued, we needed to move forward, fix the errors of technology with new technology. We needed cleaner energy sources. We needed to be smarter about developing them. I brought up climate change as a source of corporate profit. They countered with the Green Movement. I argued that it had been appropriated and driven by the corporate world. They talked about the success of non-profits. When I commented on other

conditions not necessarily energy related like student debt, a dismal job market, rising health care costs, absurd housing prices, homelessness and hunger, extreme disparities in wealth and poverty, and the rise of the police state and industrial prison complex, some of them called for more government regulation. When I pointed out that their resistance to Trudell's call to power was the very thing he argued we needed to resist, they laughed, took a breath, and shook their heads.

Some aspects of Trudell's political philosophy were simply out of reach. But it had introduced my students to the idea that there existed alternative ways of thinking about confronting the multitude of social and historical issues we had discussed as a result of his work. It had planted the seed of knowledge, as it were, which I hoped would grow into a more profound respect for the earth and a willingness to think and act beyond the impossible solutions to industrial capitalism posed by capitalism itself. Perhaps more than anything, I hoped that it would jar my students into recognizing how completely their ideas about the world had been shaped by the ideology they claimed to oppose. Their resistance to Trudell's call to power, I believed, was a good indication that I was making some strides in that direction.

On the last day of our discussion, we turned to what seems to motivate much of Trudell's philosophy. He argues that we must act out of love for the earth and its people rather than hatred for the oppressor; "We must *never* react out of hatred for those who have no sense (emphasis his)," Trudell says (5). Our hatred keeps us distracted and divided, engaged in pursuing impossible solutions posed by people who cannot see beyond their own self-interests and have no investment in the wellbeing of the planet or our own. Of course, the experiences of those who are taught to trust the oppressors are much different than those who are violently punished by them. But the end result will be the same for all us. In speech after speech, poem after poem, and song after song, Trudell expresses his deep respect for and connection to the earth and its many inhabitants. Love, it turns out, is the spirit of life for Trudell. I suggested to my class that we could do no better than begin to follow the lines that Trudell has left us.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1972, AIM delivered a twenty-point position paper entitled "Trail of Broken Treaties" to the White House, while occupying the Bureau of Indian Affairs. For a complete text of this paper, see: <http://www.aimovement.org/ggc/trailofbrokentreaties.html>

<sup>2</sup> According to Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, Trudell had been warned in a county jail that he should not go through with the flag burning protest or he'd be punished. 364-65; Lisa R. Shellenberger and Jennifer S. Baker in *Indian Country*, April 18, 2102: "In the 1970s, violence plagued the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Between March 1, 1973, and March 1, 1976, the murder rate on the Reservation soared to 170 per 100,000; the highest nationwide. The national average, 9.7 per 100,000, paled in comparison. Survivors of that brutal era refer to it as the 'Reign of Terror.' Hundreds of American Indians were assaulted, dozens died, and beatings became commonplace. The constant sound of gunfire ricocheting off the cold, South Dakota hills provided a steady reminder that murder was just outside someone's door. Murder rates have decreased since those days, but in 2003, it still remained five times the national average." Read more at <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/opinions/oglala-sioux-tribe-demands-justice-for-appalling-number-of-unsolved-reservation-murders/>

<sup>3</sup> According to Trudell, the FBI amassed a 17,000-word dossier on John Trudell.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Native-American-death-rates-soar-as-most-people-1302192.php> and <https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/disparities/>

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://capitalismmagazine.com/1999/10/the-christopher-columbus-controversy-western-civilization-vs-primitivism/>

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/05/12/encouraged-mandatory-schools-must-teach-native-history-washington-160325><sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNr4Lw4XBHU> and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbEGYIxx2\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbEGYIxx2_I)

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