

Ryan Crouch

Rhetorical Shifts

The rhetoric concerning the atrocities this country has committed throughout its history and continues to commit to this day is always talked about in the past tense: “it is a stain on our history,” “it was a tragedy.” This way of speaking, of thinking, is not an accident—a fault of language that gets cemented into the common lexicon—it is an alienation tactic. Alienating those responsible from their guilt. By placing the struggle in the past, and making that past seem more distant than it actually is, it becomes something “optional” to think about. And then, when you think about it, you can tell yourself that you aren’t part of the problem. This notion falls apart when looking at the present. I think every official in government would say they are against the assimilation and destruction of native peoples and practices, and yet pipelines still get built and economic disparities are immense. So what gives? How can the vast majority of people have such a strong opinion about atrocities in the past, and yet continue the practices of those very atrocities through to the present?

The answer comes from a two-pronged manipulation. The first half is a stretching of the timeline. The way we talk, and therefore think, about these events makes it seem as though they happened a lot longer ago than they actually did. Black and white pictures of the Civil Rights Movement are among the most blatant examples of this effort—why does my family have color photographs from my Mom’s childhood and yet all the pictures I see from a nationally publicized series of events at the same time look as though they were taken in the 1800s? By making them seem as though they happened in the distant past, we have removed our own participation in them as they happen today. Similarly, notice how these events are almost always told from the perspective of someone standing up against them. I can’t think of a single movie that takes place

in Nazi Germany where somebody doesn't recognize the horror of what is going on and risk their life to fight back, even though in real life that *barely* happened. The vast majority of Germany (and the world for that matter) just sat there and watched, but to see the way it's told, you'd think every other person was hiding "enemies of the state" under their floorboards. The same goes for slavery. Every film that takes place in the American 1800s from the last 40 years has the white character that says some version of: "I can't imagine doin' what they're doin' down there. To me, a person's a person no matter what" and then the audience can mentally masturbate to the idea of "that would have been me" when, with extreme likelihood, that would not have been you. This creation or exaggeration of conflict in these situations creates a false narrative of "good guys" vs "bad guys" that assuages our guilt in the present by allowing us to think we would have been on the right side of history *if* we had been there. The truth is you are there, those conflicts are still going on, they have just been shifted into different frameworks.

By separating ourselves from the guilty parties, we have made them into something that can be blamed for stupidity, hatred, or ignorance in whatever way we see fit. How do you think that all those homesteaders and members of the United States army felt as they invaded North America? I guarantee they felt exactly the same as most Americans feel right now about drone strikes in the Middle East or the oil pipeline every other president tries to build through Sioux lands—we know they are wrong, but we still buy into and participate in the responsible institution every single day. We have been brainwashed into believing those people in the past were brainwashed. Replacing a very complicated reality much like our own with an ancient sounding idea of "manifest destiny" is a lot more palatable than seeing ourselves so blatantly reflected in the bloody past.

The second prong of this manipulation comes from a pacification of the severity of these events. How many times have you heard America's creation and expansion described as an invasion? I can't think of a single one. Genghis Khan "invaded" Asia but we "settled" North America. In her essay, "State of Shame", Elizabeth A. Povinelli describes an indigenous Australian legal struggle for their land. Up until 1992, Australian legal precedent said that Australia was a "land belonging to no one" at the point it was "settled". It doesn't take a deep level of inference to realize what this implies about the Aboriginal Australians' status as human beings in the eyes of the government. How fundamentally do you think that government has changed in the last 30 years?

That is the main point of Povinelli's essay; their rhetoric has shifted, now they talk a lot about "truly multicultural" ideals, but it is still the same system and the same practices as always. She says this multiculturalism comes with the idea that "Good intentions and good presidents are sufficient to make institutions good versions of themselves," something that is fundamentally flawed. What people really mean by "multiculturalism" is "assimilation" and "destruction", the peoples furthest from the power are going to have to be the ones to change the most in order to fit a truly multicultural ideal. In so doing they would be forced to give up practices and beliefs deemed unacceptable by the rest of society. It wouldn't be the invaders who have to change in this situation. But putting it in those terms wouldn't allow us to dodge our responsibility like Neo dodging bullets in *The Matrix*.

This rhetorical manipulation is also not something that has happened in the past, however recently. It is, and always has been, in a constant state of happening. It has to as a fundamental function of the control itself. If the rhetoric keeps changing, we can always say that we now know what we didn't then and therefore we are different from the people who committed those

crimes. In one hundred and fifty years people will look back and wonder how we could be so self-aware of our problems and yet do nothing to change them. But of course, that will only be another facet of the same stone as they blame us for problems still ongoing in their day. In this way, the same painting is always being put in a different frame, for if it is left still for even a second, we will be unable to ignore how blatant our denial of our awful actions truly is.

A very similar legal case from the US in 1976 is written about by James Clifford in his essay "Identity in Mashpee". In which a group who called themselves the Mashpee sued for 16,000 acres of land in Cape Cod and had to prove their continued identity as part of the Mashpee "tribe" in court in order to receive it. Which makes the timeline of events something like: white invaders arrive, they claim the land as their own and spend the next 200+ years doing everything they could to destroy the Native's identity, and then say they can only get the land back if they prove that that identity as a "tribe" still exists. Here's the thing, the peoples around that area, as in much of North America, had a social structure not at all represented by the western notion of "tribe". Being forced to categorize themselves in this manner that makes sense to the invaders, and not to themselves, is another assimilation tactic. Both the Australian and the United States Governments in these respective cases congratulate themselves for "giving" some of the indigenous land back, but they are not gifts, they are allowances. The land may have gone back into the hands of its original inhabitants but the mere fact that these issues were disputed in a Western-style courtroom is far more of a victory for the invaders than any amount of acreage could represent. It serves to entrench the control of both governments: what can be given can be taken away. Both parties know that if the power of moral judgment was the other way around, the legitimacy of Western presence would instantly go up in smoke. Both governments, on the

pain of their own existence, must make sure that they maintain the power of saying what is “fair” and what isn’t.

This is the “formal freedom” Slavoj Žižek talks about in “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance”. He uses the example of online shopping—where you are free to choose any option from the list curated by the owners of the website—to describe “freedom of choice within the coordinates of existing power relationships.” The indigenous land was allowed back in the case described by Povonelli because the people got it only on the terms of the Australian government. Any other method would have been harshly denounced *even if* that method had been justified given the circumstances. Žižek puts it that you have freedom “on condition that these choices do not disturb the social and ideological balance.” Watch how quickly any violent response to a violent invasion is labeled “terrorism” not only in politics and media, but in everyday speech and thought as well, and this becomes abundantly clear. We saw an example of this in June of 2020 with the Black Lives Matter protests. Most, with the exception of a few fringe cases, said the cause of movement was justified at its core, but the millisecond private property got damaged, it instantly became a huge controversy. That property damage, not the reasons for it, became the centerpoint of the discussion. The movement left the board of existing power relationships and was decried because it was no longer operating under the definition of “fair” as set by the invaders.

The oppressed who fight back are always the ones described in violent terms (“rioter” and “looter” in the aforementioned case of the Black Lives Matter movement). Always words that conjure an image of violence and destruction. Compare “colonialism” to “terrorism”. “Colonist” feels straight out of *Little House on the Prairie* whereas “Terrorist” is associated in our minds with suicide bombings and civilian death. Controlling these associations is quite literal

mind control—the violence is distanced from those who commit it even during the discussion to hold those very people accountable. This is how even conversations of decolonization and multiculturalism become a tool for the invaders to maintain their control and superiority.

When a game is played on a board you construct, you always win. No matter the score.

Bibliography

Clifford, James. "Identity in Mashpee." *Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Harvard University Press, 1998.

Costner, Kevin, director. *Dances with Wolves*. Orion Pictures, 1990.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. "The State of Shame: Australian Multiculturalism and the Crisis of Indigenous Citizenship." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25 no. 2, 1998, pp 575-610.

Zizek, Slavov. "A Plea for Leninist Intolerance." *Critical Inquiry*, vol 28, no. 2, 2002, pp 542-566.