Racism, Silence, and Institutions
On “Drunk Indians” and other Manifestations

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It is a fact that racism is spread through silence, looking away, and avoiding hard discussions, including self-reflection. It is also true that decisions to speak out against members of one’s own group - ethnic, professional, linguistic, kinship-based, etc. - is extremely hard, because that act will put a person into the position of being perceived as a traitor. However, if racism, oppression, and genocide can only be stopped by speaking up, by taking a public stand, and by enforcing decency and respect through a lived morality, traitorous identities, as Val Plumwood calls them, are a necessity. Allowing racist essentializations to be widely distributed without a check, without raising one’s hand, and without voicing opposition in the name of complex realities means to make oneself complicit.

As an example, let us take a look at this idea that American Indians are drunks, or that drinking is something associated with Native peoples. True, some people drink. Others drink too much. However, that is true for all people - racism works by associating certain traits with specific groups of people, although there is no evidence of a specific, direct, exclusive connection. In fact, Native people as a group boost the most tea-totalers - people who do not drink alcohol - in any population in the United States. On the other hand, college students, especially college students in northern states, boost some of the highest rates of binge-drinking in the country, as does the general population in these states. And “white” Americans as a population actually show a higher rate of heavy drinkers than Native Americans. Yet, I have not heard too many people express that Minnesotans are drunks or, for example, make posters or placards or t-shirts with “Minnesotan drunk” or “North Dakota drunk” on them. On the other hand, people who propose that supposed connection between alcohol and American Indians usually really are not talking about alcohol, or Native peoples. They are simply looking to hang ethnic resentment on a convenient stereotype. That is how ethnic essentializations work. We take specific traits, isolate them from their historic, cultural, and social context, and associate them with a specific group of people. All Muslims are.... All Italians are.... All Indians are.... All racists are, actually, and this is true, essentializers, whether they endorse positive or negative ethnic stereotypes.

Being silent about these claims is disastrous. It feeds the idea by the uninformed that the racists might be right. Speaking up, however, means to take on a traitorous identity, to step outside one’s group, to open oneself for scrutiny, to accept that no one is blameless, because we all are, sometimes, ethnocentric, and we all have committed mistakes. It seems to be a much safer route to embrace “diversity” and “tolerance” without having to show civil courage, without having to admit that tolerance is not enough, without having to discuss that diversity is hard, that sometimes living with different opinions, worldviews, languages - cultures - is almost impossible, that we need to constantly make hard compromises based on a situational assessment of context. It is also very tempting to calm the waves, to blame the victims of overreacting. With drinking, for example, people point to the Irish.
Everybody celebrates Saint Patrick’s Day, and the Irish love it, they say - why should Native people get upset? Of course, there is another essentialization hidden in that statement. First, Saint Patrick’s Day as a celebration of drunkenness is not anything endorsed, embraced, or invented by the Irish. It is something that people say is “Irish”, when in reality it was invented by Americans who wanted to get drunk and have an excuse for it. Perhaps, really, perhaps, some Americans of Irish descent actually do feel proud to be associated with drinking. However, to assume that Americans of Irish descent are Irish is yet another essentialization. Second, the fact that some culture has been appropriated does not make it right to do it to another. What is revealed in those statements is simply that those kinds of arguments are about power; the power to define another culture without having to ask them for an opinion, and without any kind of reflection on reality or on oneself. The third temptation, besides remaining silent or trying to blame the victims for being upset, is to claim that victims of racist essentializations should not speak up because the oppressors, or their group, have given or are giving them other benefits. In other words, I can buy myself a ticket to racism. Of course, people who are trying to “help” others without having a clue about their culture often make things worse for them. In this example, allotment policies, boarding schools, and Termination policies all were designed to help Native peoples. They all ended up with catastrophic consequences for American Indians.

Who, then, should speak up with courage? Who should provide the hard discussions about reality? Who should lead people with morality to self-reflection? Who should educate young people about the realities of the world? I would reserve a very prominent spot for public institutions of learning. Public education, in every culture, no matter its form, teaches young people to become productive members of society - as defined by every society. The question, then, in terms of battling ethnic essentialism and racism, is: what do we want our young people to learn? I guess no public institution of learning would want students to learn to be racist. But do we want to teach them to be silent? To tolerate, yet not respect? To speak up? To become moral leaders? To have hard conversations? To analyze the contexts in which they live? Those are the questions we are facing today, just as they are the questions, we, as human beings, have faced for a long time. And our responses to that question will be the foundation on how we will be judged.